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# Constructing the Real: An Examination of Authorship and Ownership in Contemporary Verbatim Theatre

For the degree of Doctor of Philosophy: Creative  
Writing Research

University of East Anglia  
School of Creative Writing and Literature

Date Submitted: September 2009

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## Abstract

Verbatim theatre is a term for a genre of factually-based plays that in recent years have become increasingly popular on stages around the world. This study contains two components: creative and critical. The creative component consists of two original plays, *Trash* and *Cuts*. Both take the form of an inquiry into the deaths of women in the care of the State, and, at the same time, the plays create a metatheatrical argument on how theatre itself fulfils the role of an inquiry.

The critical component investigates issues raised by the practice of verbatim theatre. Through an appraisal of the intentionality and process of a number of verbatim plays, and the empirical analysis of writing *Trash* and *Cuts*, the study asks whether there is room for imaginative expression in a genre that promotes itself as a form of theatre predicated on a literalist interpretation of testimony and document. It also explores the extent that fidelity to the testimony and the document limits the form of the genre. The study examines notions of authenticity and representation in the use of factually-based material and considers the process whereby those who create verbatim control the perception and response of the audience. Finally, the study addresses the issues of who (morally and legally) owns the texts and the inherent ethical and legal implications of working within the genre. The methodology of the critical study is principally an empirical study of verbatim theatre, an analysis of a number of contemporary verbatim plays written for the stage, and an experiential analysis of the work of researching, editing and writing *Trash* and *Cuts*.

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## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all the families who allowed their lives to be exploited in my two plays, particularly Jean Pearson and Pete and Kirsty Blanksby and Pauline Campbell, who sadly died a few days after our last interview. Generous thanks, too, to Leslie Thomas and all the other interviewees for their candour and willingness to talk to an unknown playwright. And to David Hinchliff, HM Coroner, West Yorkshire, Eastern District.

*Cuts* could not have been written without the help of several organisations, in particular Inquest, Women in Prison and The Howard League for Penal Reform. Particular thanks to Deborah Coles and Hannah McFaull. Thanks, too, to the directors of the readings and productions of *Cuts*, Geoff Colman and Amelia Nicholson, and the casts who generously donated their time and talent. And to Professor Phil Scraton for chairing the debate at the ICOPA Conference.

This thesis owes more than can be said to the inspirational guidance of my two supervisors, Val Taylor, dramaturg extraordinaire, and Professor Jean Boase-Beier; and also to members of the faculty of Creative Writing and Literature at UEA who spent many hours discussing the ideas in this study.

Above all, thanks to Alan, who has lived with this study for four years, never ceases to inspire me, and is the best editor one could hope for.

I would also like to acknowledge the Arts and Humanities Research Council for generously funding this research.



Arts & Humanities  
Research Council

## Introduction

*If the Greeks invented tragedy, the Romans the epistle, and the Renaissance the sonnet, our generation invented a new literature, that of testimony.*

– Elie Wiesel, 1977:9

The theory and practice of this thesis is centred on the writing and analysis of verbatim theatre, a genre that creates its text from the theatrical realisation of original testimony and document. The plays, *Trash* and *Cuts*, that form the creative part of this study, as well as the critical analysis, test the space between facts and how they are subsequently reported and interpreted. Both plays focus on investigations into the deaths of young women in the care of the State and take the form of an inquiry. This is personal in the case of the mother in *Trash*, and official in the case of the inquest in *Cuts*. At the same time, the plays create a metatheatrical argument on how theatre itself fulfils the role of an inquiry.

Verbatim theatre promotes itself as a dramatisation of reality, a stance that prompts a number of questions in terms of its relationship with the real, and how that representation is achieved in a theatrical context. The genre, as Janelle Reinelt observes, “is in touch with the real but not a copy of it” (2009:8). The critical part of this thesis takes the form of a study of the issues raised through the genre’s dramatisation of reality. Specifically, it examines the tensions generated by the representation of the real within an artistic medium. The study places adherence to facts against the creative impulse, and analyses how these tensions are resolved in the creation of the genre. Through an appraisal of the intentionality and methodology of a number of verbatim plays, and the

empirical analysis of writing *Trash* and *Cuts*, it asks two questions: Is there room for imaginative expression in a genre that promotes itself as a form of theatre predicated on a literalist interpretation of testimony and document? And to what extent does fidelity to the testimony and the document limit the form of the genre?

The creation of this thesis also illustrates a second set of relationships between the creative and critical aspects of the work itself. The plays and the critical study demonstrate the way in which an exploration of verbatim theatre can feed into the development of a creative aesthetic for the genre, and how that creative practice then, itself, becomes the subject of empirical analysis.

The tensions that arise from the practice of verbatim theatre may be inferred from unpicking David Hare's assertion about the amount of work required in the creation of his monologic narrative *Via Dolorosa* (1998)<sup>1</sup>, based on his visits to Israel and Palestine. Hare claims that "It was a play like any other" (2005:78), a statement that is both correct and incorrect. It is accurate in that the structuring of any play calls on a number of narratological devices, and a play based on verbatim material requires structure and form. Yet, because a verbatim play is derived from original testimony and document, and purports to be a precise representation of those sources, it is not "a play like any other". There are questions of authenticity and veracity and issues of authorship not necessarily inherent in other theatrical genres.

A debate on the authorship and ownership of a text cannot ignore issues of power and control over the meaning and interpretation of that text. Verbatim theatre, which bases its dialogue on authentic speech, adds an additional level of authorship to imaginative writing, that of the original

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<sup>1</sup> The date given with the first citation of a play is that of the first production. The date used thereafter is that of the published text as listed in the bibliography.



testimony. This study examines authorship in terms of who controls what is said through the manipulation of original testimony. It tests to what extent it can be said that the playwright is the controlling influence and how much control is invested in those whose words (given orally or through documents) provide the primary texts for the plays.

Additionally, the study examines issues of authenticity, reality and representation in terms of the use of factually-based material. The study addresses the issues of who, legally, owns the texts and the inherent ethical and legal implications involved in the exploitation of primary material. The methodology employed in the critical study is principally an empirical study of the genre of verbatim theatre, an analysis of a number of contemporary verbatim plays written for the stage<sup>2</sup>, and an experiential analysis of the work of researching, editing and writing *Trash* and *Cuts*.

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<sup>2</sup> Radio drama has been experimenting with verbatim techniques in its plays and features for many years, from the original BBC Radio Ballads (1958-1964, to *Spoiled Papers* (Greg Cullen, 1986), Sarah Woods's *A Love Song to the Buses*, (1999) and *Getting to Zero* (2009). These plays are not included in this study, although several stage plays in this study, including *Unprotected*, *The Permanent Way* and *Talking to Terrorists* have been broadcast on radio.

# **Trash**

## **A Play**

**by Antoinette Moses**

**Based on verbatim transcripts**

This play is dedicated to the memory of Kelly Pearson. 1969 – 1999.

## **Trash**

JEAN is a feisty, attractive Yorkshirewoman, Bradford born and bred in her early 60s with long red hair. She is a chain smoker and has the voice to prove it. She wears reading glasses which she hangs round her neck. When she moves, she is light on her feet and can whirl like a dancer.

The action takes place in Jean's small, claustrophobic flat in Shipley, Yorkshire. There is a sofa and a chair and a coffee table on which there is a phone and books, and many files. A Victorian-style bureau, with drawers, contains more files and books on its shelves. There are photographs on the walls of musicians and her family including her daughter Kelly. There's a window on to a small garden and pots of flowers on the window sill.

**Scene 1**      **“Shush!”**

*Lights up on JEAN leaning across her chair scrabbling for her tobacco. She begins to roll up a cigarette as she will throughout the play. Jean is a chain smoker and should give this impression even though she isn't smoking.*

**Jean**                      So where was I?

Yeah. Yeah. That were it. Teatime. The knock. I didn't register at first, though I should have. Otherwise it's a call, a telephone call. I've had a few of those. "Mrs Pearson, it's about your daughter Kelly. She's been picked up...". Da di da... and you're thankful, even if it's the police. And it often were the police.

Like you get that relief when they're in prison because you think they're safe ... because you think: well, at least I know where she is tonight.

But you don't know what really goes on ... Then you meet all those mothers who've lost their children in prison. (*Sighs*) And every year, it's more...

You always hope. You always... When it's your daughter, you never think ....

*She reaches for the cigarette.*

So that's where I was. Teatime when they arrived. The two of 'em.

They're stood at the door, so I didn't connect it, even though I'd rung London the previous morning and discovered Kelly hadn't been back for her night's accommodation. She were down in London, you see.

I just turn round and they follow me into the room. It was only a very little small hallway, like this one, and they stand in front of me.

*She sits on the couch, looking up, as if at the policemen.*

I sit down on the couch and it still doesn't register, you know like some people they immediately become hysterical because they know. (*Emphatic*) It just doesn't register.

And one of them says to me: "Er...Kelly is..." And I say: "Yeah?" And he says... how did he put it? "Kelly's in hospital."

*She smiles, relieved at this news.*

And the other one says: "She's passed away."

That's how it happens. Two policemen. "Kelly's in hospital." The other one: "She's passed away".

That's how it was said.

I didn't become hysterical, but I ... I was repeating what they said over and over and over. It didn't make sense. And they wouldn't listen. They wouldn't listen. They wouldn't listen to me.

They said they'd found a piece of paper in her pocket. That's all.  
 "We've found a piece of paper with her name on", and they handed me a piece of paper with a number to ring or something, West End Central – I've still got it somewhere ...

*She gets up and opens a drawer in the bureau, begins to rifle through it but soon gives up.*

Next thing was: "Is there anybody you can ring?" And I'm saying: "Yes, me sister". "What's the number?" I gave them the number, they went to the telephone and I'm still saying (*muttering, weighing the facts*) Kelly's in hospital. She's passed away. (*Full voice*) But they wouldn't listen.

*She puts her finger to her lips.*

"Shhh!" (*Aggressively*) That's what I got from one of them.

*She puts her finger to her lips again.*

"Shhh !" Because they were trying to ring me sister. Now what do you think about that?

"Shhh." No offer of...er...do you need a doctor? No. One said: "Would you like a drink?" Funnily enough, as my head was ... I thought he meant a drink of alcohol. Me head were that funny that I was thinking he was going to pull a bottle out ... and I sort of went (*slowly*) "Yeah", and he said: "Tea?" And I just went: "No".

So they stayed. Me sister were up there pretty quickly within about ten minutes, and they were like, (*cold and short*) "Bye".

That were it. It was a “shush!” and it was a “your daughter’s in hospital”; the other one, “she’s passed away”. There were a bit of paper with her name on. “Here’s the number to ring”. Da di da. “We’ll go phone your sister”. “Shush!”. That set the whole tone.

I mean, I know they’re not bereavement ...they’re not counsellors and, to be fair, I think too much is expected of the police today. They’re expected to be mental health, all sorts, taxi services, this, that ...

Obviously I don’t have a lot of time for the police, but I don’t think their lot’s very good when I’ve read from the other side of the coin.

But really, surely they should send, maybe, a woman? To say well, she’s in hospital, then to say she’s passed away. Because when he’s saying she’s in hospital, you’re thinking, oh yeah, she’s alive. Then to say “shush” because he’s on the phone!

You know, my brother-in-law... well, my sister and myself stopped him because he started straight away in at the police. And he were saying : “It were your lot’s fault for taking her to London”, and we just shut him up because we didn’t want him getting arrested. Now I wish I’d let him go for it, because he was right.

*She calms herself down.*

Mr Upchurch, he were called. The man who found Kelly. He could have walked on; there must have been plenty who did. I’d like to thank him. Wardour Street, near the corner, he found her. Yeah. He stopped, rang the police. Six-fifteen on the Wednesday.



Wednesday. Yes. They've taken twenty-four hours before they tell me. Twenty-four hours! And it's not as if they didn't know who she was. In fact, the police did recognize her and they could have rung Eccleshill, the police station here in Bradford. They know me. They'd rung me when Kelly was picked up on the Friday before.

You're telling me they couldn't do that for a mother? Couldn't tell her her daughter was dead the day they found her?

That was how it was. Thursday 11 November 1999. Six fifteen.

**Scene 2**      *It's not about compensation*

*She goes over to one of the pile of files (the one concerning the Transport Police) and begins to open one of the files, looking for details of the warrant, but does not find it.*

The reason my daughter were in London, were that when the Bradford police picked her up – cause she were kicking off – they took her to Eccleshill Police Station. And there they found, or thought they found, an outstanding warrant from the London Transport Police.

So that's one factor. The warrant.

The police keep her in over the weekend, and on the Monday she goes to London, where they detain her at Belgravia police station, because she's too late for the court that day. On the Tuesday morning they take her across to the court. To Horseferry Road. It's in Victoria somewhere. You probably know where it is. The Magistrates Court.

But she doesn't appear in court. It doesn't come to that. At about ten o'clock in the morning, they go to the cells and tell Kelly she's free to go. The Transport Police warrant isn't valid. It's erroneous. It's been dealt with six months ago. It were a false arrest.

Her solicitors suggested I sue the police for unlawful arrest. So this is where I start the battle. Even before she's dead.

Kelly's solicitor finds her at the door of the court and he says she were confused and distressed – hardly surprising – and she doesn't know what's going on.

You see, she's not well. No. Kelly's not well at all – which is why she were kicking off in the first place. And that's the second factor. Why she's in that state.

*She goes to another pile of files.*

It were because she was sick. That's the health service.

*She thumps a third pile of the files.*

And it's the prison service, because it is my belief that it is how she were treated in prison that contributed to her mental state. Because the Kelly that came home to me from Holloway two months earlier was not my Kelly. You see, you have to go back. Follow the links, look at who were responsible. The arrest. That's the police. But before that, why were she arrested up here? Because she were kicking off ? And why were she kicking off? Because she were sick. So why were she sick?

You have to look at the evidence.

So Kelly's at the Magistrates Court and they tell her she can go, but by the time they get themselves together to give her a travel voucher, it's late afternoon. And it's too late for her to get her bus to Bradford.

They say the voucher was for the five o'clock bus, but they let her out at ten to five. How was she supposed to get from the Horseferry Road to Victoria Coach Station and queue up to exchange the docket for a bus ticket in ten minutes? She can't.

I don't want to go to court. All I want is for someone – police, probation, health service, whoever – to accept responsibility for the events that led to my daughter's death. A proper apology, not, "We're sorry for your loss", "Our sympathies lie with the family", "Tragic case, tragic girl", da di da: An apology. "We accept responsibility and we apologise." And it's not about compensation, but I would appreciate having enough money to buy a headstone for her grave. That's it.

Do you think that's too much to ask for? When you consider the amount the government has spent on lawyers, on administration, on court time, etcetera, etcetera over the past ten years?

'Points of intervention'. That's what I wrote. All those times when someone could have stepped in. That's why I need a proper inquest. One that will make people see this. So that something gets done.

You need to add up all the factors.

They didn't ask the right questions in Kelly's inquest. Well, the Coroner didn't want them to, and I'll tell you about that later.

No. You have to go back. Get all those responsible into the witness box and have them examined under oath. But they don't want to do that. Naturally.

*Jean gets out another file and digs out some papers.*

But that's what they do in an Article 2 inquest, which is what I've been asking for. You get an Article 2 inquest when the State has duty of care. Kelly was never formally released. She was on a deferred sentence when she died.

There are so many questions. Somebody ought to be asking them. Wouldn't you think?

It's tricky, this Article 2 stuff, so I'll go through it slow. It's about whether you go for a narrow test or a broad test. *(Reads)* "Where a death occurred *before* the Human Rights Act came into force, the test to be applied to the question of how the deceased came by her death was the narrower test of 'by what means' rather than the broader test of 'in what circumstances', applicable to deaths *after* 2 October 2000 to comply with Article 2 of the Human Rights Convention."

Now Kelly died in 1999. That's the year before this country adopted the Human Rights Act. So she got the narrow test. They asked how she died, but not what were the contributing factors. So I'm arguing that she should get the broad test – the contributing factors. All of them. Because the Human Rights Acts says "everyone's right to life shall be protected by law" and, in particular, Article 2 says ... *(squints)* I need better glasses, the print's so small these days....

*She reads carefully underlining every word.*

Article 2 says that there is “a positive obligation on the state to protect everyone’s life and a procedural requirement that there should be some form of effective official investigation when an individual has been killed.”

“Effective official investigation.”

But there’s a problem. The Act can’t be retrospective and Kelly died before the Human Rights Act became law in this country. But what I’m arguing, and what Fiona, my lawyer – and she’s right on top of this – is arguing, is that the first inquest into Kelly’s death was held after 2000. Which should make my case eligible. And this argument is now being debated in the European court. In Strasbourg.

So you see what I’m fighting for.

*She goes to yet another pile and takes out the press file.*

I really must have a tidy. You know what they say, a clean desk is a sign of a cluttered desk drawer.

*She takes out a pile of folded newspapers and picks up some cuttings.*

*Reads:* “Why did Kelly die in street?” “A mother’s two-year battle to find the truth about her daughter’s death.”

Two years! Ten years now and counting.

I thought it would be straightforward. That's how daft I was back then.

"My daughter were murdered by the system." I didn't know he were going to use that as a headline, but he did. Good on him! I use it as a poster. "Mother hopes to get answers..." I never get any answers. Just more questions.

*She picks up another cutting and reads.*

"Tragic Kelly's mum to quiz prison chief." A waste of space, he was.

'Tragic'. Kelly weren't tragic. I'm not tragic. I don't fit their ... whatchamacallits... profiles... (*Reads from another cutting*) "A spokeswoman for West Yorkshire police said it was a 'sad and tragic' case." They use words to make boxes.

'Misadventure'. That's what the inquest concluded. Death by misadventure. Misadventure? It was systematic neglect. All the way down the line. What were it that barrister said about the inquest verdict? I've got it here...

*She digs out the file.*

"It might just as well be a verdict on someone who fell out of a window instead of someone who was subject to a series of procedures that went wrong." Stephen Cragg, he said that. At the High Court, when he were arguing that Kelly should have an Article 2 inquest.

You know what's the most annoying phrase in the world? 'Move on'. "Isn't it time you moved on, Jean?"

Ten years since Kelly died. As if that made a scrap of difference. What do they know? Any of 'em. You have to slot in, don't you? To their tidy little boxes. Bereaved mother, what's that? Up to five years? When's the sell-by date? Isn't it time you moved on, got on with your life?

I don't have a life since Kelly died.

What makes me so angry is I knew. I knew how bad she was and nobody would listen.

'Get over it!' Mothers don't get over it.

'Tragic'. They'd like me to be a victim. Like that Jeremy Kyle did to poor Ann-Marie's parents. Terrible, that story. Anne-Marie's death and her brother's suicide, the other brother in a permanent vegetative state after an attempted suicide. 'Tragic victims', that's way he painted it – Kyle. Victims. But in Anne-Marie's inquest there was a whole lot of stuff about the prison where she died. Terrible behaviour. Failings all along the line.

But that Kyle wouldn't let Anne-Marie's parents open their mouths. Not a word. You're victims. Applause, please. Shut up and get into your box.

*She puts her fingers to her lips.*

Shhhh.



Jeremy Kyle wouldn't have shut me up, I can tell you that. I'd like to see him try! Can you imagine? (*Laughs*) You know the difference between the British Justice system and a rottweiler? With a rottweiler, you've got a chance of getting out alive.

I tell you. This whole thing has turned me into a radical. And I weren't before. This has radicalised me. And I will get my apology even if it kills me.

**Scene 3*****With hindsight***

*Jean is sorting a file of photos and letters. She has a pot of tea on the table.*

You go back. You can't help yourself. You think, could I have...?

Like when Kelly was a baby. She'd have these tantrums and throw herself against the cot. It right scared me. So I took her to the doctor and they said it was normal. But ... but was that right?

I keep going back and asking myself, why? Because you don't know.

Kelly was fine at school. She were a lovely girl. She'd get angry sometimes, yeah, but nowt like...

I had no problems with her, neither, up to her being ...about sixteen, fifteen maybe, when she started having a sneaky drink, or she thought she were having a sneaky drink.

With hindsight. Yeah.

For one thing, I'd have moved. When Kelly were young we were living on the Canterbury Estate. (*Sighs*) Well, the Canterbury had a bad reputation before estates had bad reputations. But Sean and Kelly had lots of friends there and ... you stay. You just stay. The trouble began when they closed the Perseverance. Which is up Lumb Lane, was up Lumb Lane.

Now the Perseverance was a club where drugs as well as drink were dealt – from the soft to the hard. The police knew it, everybody knew it, nobody dragged anybody there. I totally disagreed with them closing that down, I'll be honest with you. Because then, the Canterbury became the first estate to be hit with drugs. And of course, all the other estates followed.

So what they did, by closing down a place like that, is they made young children like Kelly vulnerable. Because they brought the drugs to the estate instead of leaving it where it was, for people who wanted them. Suddenly there were drugs everywhere on the estate. Which wasn't the case when that club was open. So instead of sneaking off for a little drink, it was puffs of this, puffs of that ...

You see, my Mam was ill with the cancer and she came to live with us. Kelly must have been, I don't know, fifteen? And they have needs at that age, don't they? And I was that worried about my mother.

I should have had time for Kelly.

You can beat yourself up a hundred different ways.

So Kelly left home at seventeen to set up house with her boyfriend. I've learned since that he was suffering with some mental illness, but her trouble started with him. He were also very possessive, so they had a lot of problems. She was too young to cope with him.

Funny ... He used to come to me, actually, talking to me, crying to me about Kelly how much he loved her. And, you know, when they split up and he couldn't bear to lose her, and all this. I should have been talking more to me daughter than to him, really.

Anyhow. That was the start of it. At some point while she was with him she ended up on heroin. I think she might have been eighteen or nineteen.

Kelly's medical records say she went to the doctor then. She were terrified. She'd been smoking it, you see. The heroin.

There's this record in the medical notes of her begging and saying: "Well, you know, I...I...I'm frightened I'm going to go on the needle." Which obviously she did. So to me, that's the first time that someone could have intervened.

Points of intervention. These moments when ... and with hindsight, you see it could have been different.

She did try to get off the heroin. Well, she kept trying. But even back then. She was in that place, what were it? Windy Oaks. It's closed now. I never knew any of this then. There were a period of six months when I really didn't see her. She used to pass on her way on her way up to his family and pass my house.

We'd had some falling out...it didn't repair itself for a long while. No....

The drugs.

But the mental ... Some of that was because of the drugs, I accept that. But it was aggravated by her stay in prison. Her first time, 1997 and 98.

Kelly talked to me over the phone, from prison, when she finally made contact with me. Said she'd had a breakdown. The self-harming started after this. Well, they learn it in prison, don't they?

*She picks up some letters. She finds it hard to read them, though she wants to.*

I've got her letters here. I can hear her when I read them. "Hi ya Mum and our Luggy"... that's the name she had for her brother, Sean. "Wonderful to hear from you again..."

*She's overcome. She puts down the letters, pours herself a cup of tea and picks up some photos from the pile.*

I need to blow up a couple more pictures. I don't like that one.

*She puts it back inside a file.*

That was when she was in Holloway. That's not how I see her.

*She gets up and goes over to a framed photo on the wall, Kelly as a teenager.*

That one where she's in lemon, in the anorak, that's in a caravan, at Scarborough. Yeah. She looks a bit maungy in that, I forget what the problem was. I think she were having a sulk over summat. But she loved that holiday because upstairs there was a disco...

(Sings): And girls they want to have fun  
Oh girls, just want to have fun.

*Laughs at herself.*

I used to sing. Before. I'd just got myself a new guitar when Kelly were in prison. I don't touch it now. Kelly wrote from prison that she'd like to learn. But...

Yeah, we were on holiday in Scarborough. Upstairs there was the disco and downstairs there were me and me sister because the entertainment were a bit older. But Kelly came down, too. She kept going up to the other room and coming down. I asked her: "Are you up or down, Kelly?" She said: "Well, I like it down here better than up there." But she wanted to be in both places. She were very lively, she were always ...always wanted to see what were over the next hill.

You want a word? Bubbly.

We'd some good holidays together. She liked life. She were, like... there ... there ... there! She liked to know what were going on. When I first went to Soho, I could see what the attraction was for her. Oh yeah. Vibrant. I could see how, you know, she would find it difficult to come away from there.

*She catches sight of herself in the mirror and smooths her hair.*

They say that time's a great healer, but it's a lousy beautician.

*Looks up at another photograph on the wall.*

That's me when I were eighteen and that's me mother. That's me dad. My son, Sean and Kelly. Now here...

*She points to an empty space on the wall.*

I'm waiting for some blow-ups of me other two sisters.

People think that's me wedding dress! Wedding? You want to know what my wedding were like? I was out here...*(Laughs)* Eight days before I were having Sean, down on the bus to the register office, to a fish shop and back up to pub. Boooof! *(Laughs)* I don't even want to think about it. I must have been wrong in me head.

*She turns round to face the other wall.*

That's Desmond Dekker...you know The Israelites. He was at the Queen's Hall. I used to go see him all the... every time... and I pulled him off the stage to have a photo with me. And that's Richard Whiteley with my mother. She worked in the sewing factory, and he came. Yeah. And that's Bob Dylan.

Great fan of Dylan. Always have been. That book he wrote. Got it out from the library. Wonderful!

It weren't all doom and gloom, you know. We had our moments, me and Kelly. We used to laugh, even at the end. She were a right giggler. Like when she were young, we always went out the Saturday night. So, Saturday afternoons Kelly and I'd watch those old black and white movies.

You know, where they sound all staccato and... ( *in a Thirties clipped voice*) “We have to do this, my dear, it’s for the best...”.  
And every time there’s this big drama, someone always says: “Shall we have a cup of tea, mother?”

*She sips her tea.*

Shall we have a cup of tea, mother? It were our joke.

And Bonfire Nights. Brilliant Bonfire Nights. Me and Kelly were always the last sat at them. Watching the fire with a glass of my punch. Famous it were, my punch.

We were always closest on Bonfire Nights. Which makes it hard ...

No. I’ll come to that later.

Yeah. There were good times, me and Kelly. Now I come to think about it.

*She goes to the CD player and puts on Girls Just Want to Have Fun (Cyndi Lauper) and hums along with the music, dancing across the floor, as she clears up the tea things.*



**Scene 4**                      *It's here in black and white*

*Jean is seated at her desk writing a letter carefully.*

“Dear Alan Johnson...”\* I’ve been through six Home Secretaries.  
Six! And not one apology.

Prison. That’s where the real problems began. In my opinion.

*She picks up a thick document and peers at it through her glasses.*

I got this from the prison ombudsman, or ombudswoman, being  
since she were a woman. Thirty-seven pages. “Serious omissions”,  
she found. “Inaccurate and incomplete information”.

It were in March 2004 when I got it. Five years after Kelly died,  
and it were the first time I got a clear picture of what took place in  
Holloway.

I’d been fobbed off, and she can see it. Because the Director  
General said he would investigate after the inquest. I’ve got this  
letter here from Martin Narey, who were the Director General of  
the prison service back then, and he says... let me get this ....

*She digs out the letter and reads it.*

“Dear Mrs Pearson ... Although Kelly’s tragic death did not occur  
in prison, there would appear to have been contributory factors”.  
You see! “And circumstances of her time in custody that may have  
added to her mental instability.”

---

\* Insert the name of the current Home Secretary.

And this report says there are questions that need to be answered from the Prison Service. Which I am still waiting for. Ever since I got this report, I've never received not (*clicks her fingers*) that from them. Not (*clicks again*) that.

*Jean puts down the report and picks up a well-thumbed copy of Black Medical Dictionary which is heavily bookmarked with strips of paper.*

It's my belief it were the drugs they put her on in Holloway that time that changed Kelly, that led to the events that killed her. But they won't listen. They will not listen.

I've taken complaints out against the trusts, the prison, the probation, the doctors and it's a waste of time. But it's here (*indicates the dictionary*) in black and white. And it so frustrates me.

It seems as if once you're in prison, the drug treatment is automatic, same for everyone, one size fits all, and who gives a toss about your individual needs, or your size. Kelly were a slip of a girl. And that makes a difference.

Kelly tells them – well they know, don't they, it's in her records – about her past drug use. So she's put on a double detox for drink and drugs, which means they give her a reducing dose of methadone.

But she weren't on the heroin or the methadone before she goes into Holloway.

And the doctor who actually took the time to interview her in prison *after* the detox wrote down – and it’s in his hand writing – that she were off the methadone and crack cocaine two years.

She’d come off them on her own. She was taking pills, yeah, and the drink. But in prison they give her methadone. And, course, she’ll take it. You think she’ll say no? She’s never going to say no.

(*Slowly*) No. She’ll never say no to that.

But the methadone weren’t the half of it. There were five drugs she were on every day in Holloway: Carbamazepine, Prothiaden, Nitrazepam, Diazepam, (that’s Valium) and Melleril.

I’ve read up on all of these. You should see the letters I get: “Dear Healthcare Professional...” That makes me laugh. Me! Shows what I could have been.

First, there’s the Carbamazepine. According to MIND, this is now used for manic depression, though the doctors say there were nowt wrong with Kelly’s mind.

But she’d been cutting herself and all sorts before she came in. I weren’t there, so I can’t tell you if she was manic at that time, and certainly nobody bothered to find out. And they put Kelly on 200 milligrams twice a day.

Next, Kelly’s on this Prothiaden, which, according to the manufacturers is counter-indicated for people with psychotic illness and during the manic phase of manic depression. Then there’s the Nitrazepam to help her sleep. Although...

*She takes a piece of paper out of the book which is a printout of the manufacturer's instructions.*

*(Reads)* “this drug causes confusion and should not be used in cases of phobias and obsessional states”.

I'm not making this up. These are the manufacturer's counter indications. They say – and, remember this – that withdrawal symptoms may occur if the treatment is stopped suddenly.

The prison reported Kelly saying she'd been taken out of her cell at night. She couldn't be persuaded otherwise – And this got worse after she came home –

Also she were pouring water on the floor and saying it was raining. Raining! There's comedy in stuff, isn't there? Anyhow, they turned her tap off.

Then there's the Valium for the alcohol withdrawal symptoms, and its adverse reactions are: irritability, vivid dreams, and anger, hostility, mania and insomnia. Which Kelly had. But when you present these symptoms in prison, you get punished.

*(Aside)* And when you present these symptoms at a health clinic, you get thrown out to die.

Kelly were punished for being sick, for self-harming. It's disgusting. They put her in strips – that's all her clothes taken off her for nine days. They've stopped that now as being against human rights, but it must have contributed to how she was feeling, mustn't it? Nine days! It was the Ombudswoman who found that out.

*She picks out another piece of paper.*

But we're not done yet. Finally, Kelly were given this Melleril. Now Melleril is an antipsychotic used for schizophrenia, or was until it was banned in 2005 for causing arrhythmia – abnormal heart beats.

Kelly said she thought she'd had a breast implant around her heart area. About which they took no notice. The listed side effects of Melleril are confusion and visual disturbances. Kelly said it made her feel as if she were tripping but the doctors won't hear any of that. But how could these doctors know if they haven't tested them themselves?

My daughter was emphatic about how she felt, and who would know better about feeling as if you were tripping than an experienced drug user? And the manufacturers themselves say vivid dreams, visual disturbances. You see, the doctors don't want to know. They don't listen.

I'm not saying they shouldn't give them something because if they've been on hard drugs, they've got to. Can't withdraw completely. But they should have talked to Kelly properly. Found out what she were taking at the time. Not given her all those at once, all mixed like that.

They're giving all these drugs to her when they know she's coming up to court and may be released. So it's not as if they can monitor their effect. And the day she comes out: nothing. Zero. No pills. No medication, no prescription, no letter to a doctor. Nothing.

It were more than six weeks before the prison doctor wrote a letter.

*She goes to a file and takes out the letter.*

I've got it here and it weren't the right information. He's got a quite different list. Can you believe that? And they still claim it was standard procedure.

Imagine it. One moment you're tripping on this mass of drugs and the next, nothing. Well, is it surprising that she were out of her head when she comes home? Because that weren't my daughter who came back to me after that time...

*She picks up the report from the file.*

Even the report says it. (*Reads*) "Kelly was showing signs of paranoia and delusion." But the doctors still say there's (*reads:*) "no serious interactions between the medications". They don't say what happens when you suddenly stop taking them. And they still say this, which is why I have to keep arguing. Because it could be another girl another day, and another mother who has to go through what I've been through.

Kelly never stood a chance.

(*She exhales*) I need a drink. More than a cup of tea, I think.

*She pours herself a shot of whisky.*

I don't understand pub measure. Singles! They just dirty the glass.

*She drinks.*

Kelly and I weren't in touch at that time. Or only intermittently. She did come back from time to time and we did talk on the phone. It weren't a good time for her, but she were coping. I often said to her: "Why don't you come home and give yourself a break from the streets? Come home for a week or two."

And she'd be so relieved and she'd say: "Yes, yes, yes." I'd say: "Well, look, can you get some money?" And she was: "I've spent me money," and I say "Look, can you borrow summat?" She says: "Yeah, yeah." I say: "Well, go", I say. "And how long will it take you?" "Oh, a couple of hours."

So, I say: "Well, look, do that. Ring me from the station and come back here." (*Quieter*) Never heard 'owt from her. Never heard until the next time she rang.

So the first I hear that she's back in Holloway, it were on summat like the 20<sup>th</sup> of August – I've got it all wrote down somewhere, the exact. And it was this here probation officer calls me. Swedish. I've no time for Swedish, me. This is not the only Swedish woman in this story.

Anyhow, she was telling me that Kelly were in prison and she were questioning me about my health, and I sounded very robust, and da di da. And it were all her doing the talking. Kelly was in a really bad way. She were suicidal, she'd cut her wrists, she was vulnerable to men and if she could get her a deferred sentence, could she come to me?

I said: “Yes. But I want back-up.” And I was adamant about that.

*(Jean employs a heavy Swedish accent)* “What d’you mean?”

I mean, obviously they need registering in with a doctor when they’re an addict. “I want back-up”, I said. “Any kind – social worker, probation officer, but I want back-up. I’ll get her registered in with my doctor.”

She said, and she kept saying: “What’s wrong with her?” Now, she’d been to see her in prison. “What’s wrong with her?”

“Look,” I said, “I haven’t seen Kelly for two years,” which were right. I’m thinking: You should know better than me.

“Well anyway,” she said, “if I can do it.”

That’s fine, I thought.

“Oh, and would you write to her?” Well, obviously, I were going to write.

“And write quickly to her, because you know she needs this connection.”

I wrote a letter that night. But I rung the prison. I got the number and I rung.

So I’m speaking to some officer, and I say: “My daughter’s in here. I’ve had a call from her probation officer. I haven’t heard from her.



I haven't seen her for a couple of years...would it be possible to talk to her? She's not right good."

And this officer says to me: "She's fine. I've just come back from the shop with her." I say: "Well, the probation officer's been on the phone telling me that she's suicidal." "She's fine," she says. "I'll just go speak to somebody and see if you can talk to her."

So they let her come on the phone and we had a little chat. "I'm sending you a letter, Kelly," I say. "Maybe you'll be able to come home on a deferred sentence."

She weren't all right. It transpired afterwards that the day staff had not passed on to the night staff – cause this was about eight o'clock at night, so I was talking to the night staff – that Kelly was actually suicidal. Had been threatening suicide, was in a terrible state. She'd taken an overdose before she got picked up and cut herself in West Central Police Station the day before she goes into Holloway.

After the Swedish item rings and asks me if Kelly could come to me, I'm waiting to hear if it's going to happen. "I'll ring you and let you know if she's coming", she'd said.

She never called.

What happened was, on 7<sup>th</sup> September, I got a call about two o'clock in the afternoon from another probation officer, "Your daughter will be on the five o'clock coach. Will be arriving at midnight in Bradford."

*She shakes her head in disbelief.*

I fetched Kelly and we got back to me flat. There were a little small television in the corner and when she walked through that door, she looked at it and said: “What’s that?”

“It’s a television, Kelly.”

And she’s: “Are you sure? Is it wired up to the wall?” This is how she spoke, like a child. I said: “It’s plugged in. It’s a television, love.”

I knew she weren’t right. I knew she were not right that minute she walked through my door.

So I sat up with her a bit, gave her summat to eat, talked.

There was only the one bedroom, like here, but I had a double bed. So it were late and I said: “Come with me to bed.”

As it happened, I’d had a switch mended just a few weeks before and the plasterers had left a bit of a mess around the thing.

*(Exhales)* When she’s seen that light!

“Www...what’s this?” She said: “It’s wired up! It’s wired up! There’s a microphone!”

Well, I’m trying to explain about the plasterers but ...

“No! No! No!”

She wouldn’t sleep in the bedroom. She slept on the sofa.

I knew the next thing I had to do was immediately, quickly, get her to the doctor's. Which I did the next day. And they gave her enough Valium for one night and then the day after that, a week's supply.

Because they had no idea what she'd been on in the prison. How could they? I didn't know then. I only found out when I finally got these records from Holloway.

Kelly got worse and worse. The times I had to call out the doctor. One time, she thought she were shrinking. She were screaming: "I'm shrinking!"

I rung the doctor's receptionist. "Er, what do you mean, she's shrinking?"

I said: "I'm telling you what she said to me."

You know, they're so pig-headed.

I've stood at that desk, crying. The doctors suggested the Bridge, who are supposed to help addicts, so I went there. "We can't do nothing because she's not on drugs."

I went back to the nurse and told her what they'd said, and the nurse said, "You should have lied." "You should have lied."  
(*Snorts*)

So Kelly gets to see a psychiatrist – and she were Swedish. I told you there was more than one! But she would not get Kelly sectioned. I couldn't get anyone else to monitor Kelly's behaviour, because they wouldn't believe me.

Weeks, I tried. Weeks. Until it were more or less promised that Kelly would get a bed in Lynfield Mount, that's the psychiatric hospital.

Kelly and I were up at nine o'clock because she were fretting saying: "How am I gonna get there?" I said: "Kelly, don't worry about that."

So. Kelly and I are sat there waiting, waiting till a phone call comes from the psychiatrist. Kelly took it and she kept looking round at me, and I heard her say this as plain as with me own ears.

*(Swedish accent)* "You are backed against a wall, aren't you, Kelly?"

I didn't say anything. There weren't a bed.

After that, I could not get Kelly into a hospital. This psychiatric nurse from MIND came to the flat and saw Kelly and she tried to get her sectioned, but she were fobbed off. She rung me very upset, said they won't do it.

It got terrible. Kelly used to freak, you know, if I went to telephone. I had to end up going to social services a lot of times, along the road, to use the telephone.

I've cried and cried and my own doctor's come, and she says: "You've took on...you've took on something, Jean." She didn't know the half of it.

You know what Kelly says to me? “They’ve set me up to die, Mum.” Because she were costing them too much money.

If there’d been the beds. If there’d been the back-up.

Because two years before, Kelly wrote me from Holloway that she were doing really well with courses, anger management, and that she were down for a place at this rehab Hopkins House. It were a high-care stay with twenty-four hour supervision, anger management, and leading on to permanent accommodation. “At last”, she wrote. If there was a place when she left. She sounded right chuffed. Then they moved her to another prison. They moved her three times and she didn’t get her place at Hopkins House. They didn’t have the funding. When she came out of prison in the spring, she told me she’d had a breakdown.

There aren’t enough places. And if you don’t get in, you just slip through the net and you’re back on the streets. Then what chance have you got?

*She gets herself another drink.*

You’re not a priority are you, if you’re homeless? Drug addict. Alcoholic. Trash. Avoid them.

*She points to the theatre exit sign.*

You go outside that door and you see them. You know what I’m saying.

Like the press ... Now I don't want to disparage the local papers because they've been good to me, but they can't help it.

You see, Kelly were found sitting beside a Council bin. It were a grit bin, and I've told them that. But that's not what they write.

It's: Kelly's body were "found in rubbish in a Soho street". Then it's "a pile of rubbish", and you end up with that Kelly was "dumped in a pile of rubbish". You see what they're doing? Like she were trash. That's what the press does.

Kelly were my daughter. She wanted to do things. Get herself off the drugs. Have a life. And all the time I get: "Well, she were a drug addict, weren't she?" So her life doesn't matter? So I don't have a right to find out the truth?

*Jean breaks down.*

Sorry. Sorry. But it ... Ohhh .... Because I believe that that drug regime and coming off it like that, was what killed my daughter. And I can't get anyone to listen to me or do anything about it, and it right gets to me.

I will get another inquiry if it takes the High Court, the Appeal Court, every court in this country.

**Scene 5**      *I'm beginning to understand*

*Jean has a map of London open in front of her.*

I didn't know London before. Now I've been to them places. I spent a morning down by the Embankment talking to the drunks, and they knew Kelly. They all knew Kelly.

I thought, how do you cope living down here, Kelly? How do you sleep at night? Because they were talk, talk, talk, and you can't turn them off and you can't leave, because it's safer with them.

You don't think about these things, do you? I never did before, but now...

I've learned more about Kelly since she died than when she were alive.

*She goes to the window and looks out, then deadheads a flower from a pot on the window sill.*

Many a night and I'm lain here and it's raining and, you know, I'm glad I've got a roof over me. Those poor souls out there. Stuff you don't even think of until it affects you.

I'm beginning to understand how much she suffered. I'm suffering her suffering. Maybe that's the purpose of my life.

That's fine.

People loved Kelly. She wrote me from Holloway about all the letters she got. It surprised her because she'd only been there for two weeks. She said, even from people she'd thought were acquaintances. But that were Kelly. She were a lovely girl. She'd give you the last pound in her pocket.

Yeah, Kelly were on remand quite a few times for various things. Obviously, drugs being one of them.

Now, I've never heard 'owt as ridiculous in my life as somebody who's a registered heroin addict being put in prison because they're in possession of heroin. Is that not the nature of addiction? I mean, it's a nonsense. It's tosh! It's absolute tosh!

I told Mo Mowlan that. I told Keith Halliwell that. You know, I mean, God forbid she... poor woman's dead now, Mo Mowlam ... Keith Halliwell – well, I don't know what good he was as a drugs czar, but he originates from up here and he weren't much good up here.

They shouldn't be in prison. No. They should be in medical establishments with full back-up – you know, probation officers, social workers, doctors, psychiatrists – whatever they need. Of course, shoplifting isn't right. But it's done to support the drug habit. They wouldn't be doing that if they didn't have a drug habit.

If the Government supplied them with the heroin, they'd be taking them away from the pushers, and the pimps. They'd be taking them away and supplying them on a maintenance and reduction thing. And that'd get rid of that. Them shit trash.



So they go into prison. And it's worse when they come out. They don't have anywhere to go. They're back on the streets.

How can they function...how can they? When they're waking up on the street and the first thing they need is a cup of tea. So where are they going to put the kettle on? They can't go put the kettle on. They've got to have a can of beer. They've got to have summat in order to survive out there.

If they had somewhere to live. If there was somewhere where they could get their fix. On a reduction programme. Registered addicts should be on a maintenance and reduction programme of heroin.

Forget the methadone. Forget it. It's like giving somebody a bottle of gin who drinks whisky.

Then it wouldn't be: 'How do I get the money for my fix?' first thing. It would be: 'Get my fix then focus on: I've got to go to the Day Centre today . I'm going to see so-and-so about accommodation.' And they could get themselves sorted. You can't, out there on the streets. I'm learning this now.

*She folds up the map and puts it back in a file.*

All these files, but Kelly's not in any of them. Not my Kelly.

I'll tell you this story. Kelly's on the street – she's about twenty-eight, now – and she takes this young lad Gareth under her wing.

Gareth has been thrown on the streets because his stepfather married again after his mother died and the step-mother didn't take to him. Somehow he meets Kelly. She's like a mother figure to him.

And Gareth has a dog. He's a kid, about sixteen, but he's besotted with Kelly and they're going from place to place. But Kelly she feels he's too young and she goes off with another guy, who isn't a kid. A short time later, Gareth is found with a needle in his arm. I don't know whether he were murdered or ...

*Jean rolls a cigarette.*

So Kelly ends up with Gareth's dog. Which happens to be pregnant and has several pups. Then somebody steals the dog, and Kelly's left with the pups. Now Kelly's living in a hostel, and that's when she phones me and tells me the story.

I can remember her saying: "I'm hid in a cupboard, Mum, with Gareth's pups." Eventually, she ends up with one pup. Gives away the others, as one does. So there she is on the street, this particular night, in 1997, with this pup, when this woman comes into her sphere. She's drunk and she starts on at Kelly. (*She assumes an Irish accent*) "You shouldn't be having dogs, you street people!" She and Kelly start fighting and this woman ends up in hospital. That's what Kelly got the time for the first time, ABH. But to me there were actual bodily harm on the other side too. She nearly bit Kelly's finger off.

So with Kelly arrested, what does she do about the pup? She adores this pup.

She decides to bring it to us here in Yorkshire. She's on bail, has to sign in at the police station, and she comes up here a few weeks, then it's back to London. But she misses the pup. Oh, she were ringing and ringing and asking for it.

"How's the pup, Mum?" How is it? Does it miss her? She misses it. She wants it back. So, after a few days of this, Seamus – her street dad, she called him – Seamus comes here to fetch the pup. *(Sighs)* Within a week or two, the pup is run over right in front of her.

I don't know what you'd do, but Kelly takes the dead pup back to the hostel where she's staying and leaves it on the bed. Then out on the streets and ... *(mimes drinking)*. She gets thrown out of the hostel. Obviously. Then Kelly gets two friends of hers to help her bury the pup in a churchyard in Soho.

When's she's in prison, in Holloway, it's the one thing she keeps asking for in her letters. "Mum, can you send me that photo of Lucky... have you got that negative of Lucky, Mum?" Lucky. That were its name.

*Jean takes the map out again and finds the churchyard.*

That's where she buried it. Seamus showed me. And he told me that when she was depressed, Kelly slept there. On the bloody spot.

*(Sighs)*

Oh God, they do some stuff.

**Scene 6**      *I will not allow them to do this*

*Jean is pacing slowly backwards and forwards. She stops.*

I've had two breakdowns since Kelly died. It's like I've been walking uphill in a gale for the last eight years. On and on. Sometimes it gets too much. Because it's like the whole system is shutting doors in my face. And sometimes ... You wouldn't believe what they say to me.

But I will not allow them to do this. To fob me off and treat me like .... like ...

There was this doctor. I rang up during the night. It were a few years back, and it were this locum service. Well, the doctor rings me back and...

*Jean assumes the doctor's voice. It's abrupt and irritated from the outset. The voices alternate between Jean and the doctor.*

"What's happening to you tonight?"

"I'm just. I keep crying."

"Would that be without any reason?"

"It's because of me daughter."

And he goes: "Hmmm"

And I'm: "It just keeps like I can't stop shaking and I feel like I am my daughter."

"Why? What's happened to your daughter?"

So I tell him she's dead.

"How did she die?"

"The police took her to London on a false warrant and then let her on to the streets. She was found the day after."

"Found?" he asks.

"Pardon?" I say.

"How do you mean, found? Do you mean she had overdosed on heroin or something?"

So I try and explain, but he's: "But why did she die?"

I tell him there hasn't been an inquest yet...

*(Interrupting)* "Oh right, so this is very recent, then, is it?"

"No," I say, "1999."

"1999?"

"Yes."

“A bit strange.”

He asks if there’s been a post mortem and I tell him about the Valium, and that there was a small amount of drink and some methadone, and he says: “So she overdosed.”

I’m saying no, actually she was killed, really. And he starts arguing with me.

“No,” he says, without knowing anything about it. “She killed herself.”

I try to explain and he’s: “I’m sorry, I’ve missed the point. Are you saying the police forced her to take the tablets and take the methadone?”

Then he asks me: “Was she an adult?”

“It doesn’t matter if she was an adult. She was in a vulnerable state. She was ill.” And he’s telling me that what I’m saying hasn’t helped. Kelly took an overdose. My anger is misdirected.

Now I’m more than upset. I’m trying to tell him about how she had a lot of Valium with her, how I never wanted the doctor to prescribe that much.

“It’s a contributory factor.” I tell him. “The doctor had no right to give her two weeks’ supply of Valium. Everybody knows that Valium...you don’t prescribe it to someone with alcohol problems or only with great caution.” (*Aside*) I got that from Black’s Medical Dictionary.

“I don’t think your shouting at me will help.”

“Well, you’ve asked me what happened and what’s wrong with me. I’m telling you what’s wrong with me.”

“You’re angry.”

I was beyond angry. I was that upset, because he asked me and then started telling me stuff. And arguing.

“It’s the first time you’ve heard anything about it,” I tell him. “I’m telling you what happened to her and when it happened. She was dumped and abandoned on the streets.”

Suddenly, he asks: “Do you have a crystal ball? I don’t.”

“A crystal ball? What do I need a crystal ball for? She was taken to London and abandoned onto the streets in an ill condition”.

“And she took an overdose,” he says again.

Well!

“You can cut that overdose,” I says to him. “It’s what a doctor here prescribed. And shouldn’t have prescribed.”

Then he starts at me: “And where was the mother at this time?”

“The mother?”

“Ahem.” he goes.

“I was here in Yorkshire,” I tell him. “On the phone, desperate for news, as it happens.”

So he’s all sarky: “Yes,” he says.

“What do you mean by that?”

And he asks me how was I supporting my daughter, and did I go to London with her? And I try to explain how the police wouldn’t even allow me to see my daughter.

He goes on and on about how I wasn’t with her. And he’s telling me Kelly chose not to ring me. But she did ring me.

“So she rang you prior to committing suicide.”

I’m trying to get it into his head that it isn’t suicide, but he won’t listen: “It is suicide when you...”

I’ve had enough. (*Shouting*) “It is *not* suicide. How do you know? I know what the coroner told me. I’m not fucking arguing with you, you bastard. I’m complaining about you – what’s your name... ?”

“Do you want me to spell it out for you?” he asks.

Then he asks me if I tried to help Kelly. There’s no short answer to that one. And he’s back on that Kelly rang me up before she committed suicide.



“I don’t think it’s very helpful you making assumptions about what’s happened to my daughter. I can assure you my daughter did not commit suicide and the verdict coming back will not be suicide, so don’t assume things you know nothing about.”

“I don’t think I’m helping you,” he says, finally. Which were the only true thing he said in the whole conversation. So I took out a complaint against him, and it were upheld, because they had the transcript of the conversation.

I complain. Yeah. I look to see where I can complain.

I was in this chemist shop just the other day...I won’t go into it, but the young girl couldn’t bothered to check if they had any Vitamin C. She said (*voice of bored young assistant*) “I suggest you go to Superdrug.” I said, “I suggest you stack shelves at Morrisons!”

I have to say they dealt with it extremely well. I got an excellent letter, a full apology and a voucher ... straight away. So I go back there and say, thank you. Go on using the shop. If you deal with it properly, it’s over. Done and dusted. How it should be.

In this country we’ve been brainwashed not to make a fuss. I’m not buying that.

**Scene 7**      **More than a cock up**

*Jean now has a laptop and she is slowly typing a name into Google.*

Me son Sean's set up this computer for me. It's brilliant. I can find all this stuff, just like that.

*She clicks open a file.*

Kelly's inquest was adjourned six times. When it took place, it were a cover up. The coroner had his mind made up before it started, and I can prove it.

You don't believe me? There was an exchange of emails between the coroner's office and the London Probation Service. In which the coroner warned my solicitors to back off trying to contact the Probation Service, and reassured the Probation Service that – and I'm quoting – “they had nothing to fear”, because the likely outcome of the inquest would be accidental death.

Before the inquest took place. Before the jury had heard a word. What do you think of that? Eh?

Let me tell you. I've got it here. The same coroner did the same for Harry Stanley just a couple of months after he rubbished my inquest.

Remember the man shot dead by the police because he was carrying a repaired table leg in a carrier bag?

The same coroner, in the same court, ruled out a verdict of unlawful killing, which left the jury with a choice between ‘lawful killing’ and an open verdict. Don’t get me started on coroners!

I didn’t stand a chance.

It weren’t helped by the fact that, because of all the postponements, I’d lost me barrister – actually I lost two barristers, and I ended up with this pupil, Rebecca. And I don’t think she had the experience to stand up to the coroner, who was against us from the start. Though to give her her due, she did try, and the coroner did the same to the barrister for the Stanley family, and he were a QC. You’d think he’d be able to argue his corner. But the coroner wouldn’t let him speak. Told him to sit down. He did the same to Rebecca. And to me. Several times.

I’ve got it here, the transcript of Kelly’s inquest. I’ll read a bit to you, it were disgusting. This coroner were interrupting me when I was trying to tell about the phone calls I’d had with Kelly just before she died. Then when Rebecca starts asking the police about the warrant, he stops her.

“It is not this court’s purpose to really pursue matters about the ‘whys’ and ‘ifs’,” he says. “I’m into enquiries into matters that directly caused the death. I hope you respect what I have told you, because at the end of the day, it is for me to determine what is relevant in this court”.

She tries, Rebecca, to remind him of the scope of the inquest, but he shuts her down. Bam! She tries again.

She were persistent. “I want it on record,” Rebecca says, “that it is entirely appropriate for an identification of any deficiencies in the system, and for you, Sir, to recommend steps whereby they might be remedied”.

He doesn’t want to hear that. He’s got one thing in his head: Was it suicide or accidental and he’s not going to allow anything else.

What was Kelly’s state of mind just before she died? Any questions about how she got into that state of mind. Bam!

*She puts her fingers to her lips.*

Sssh!

Kelly weren’t in the court that day. No. It were like none of them knew her. Or what had been going on.

Like, when the solicitor said that Kelly was upset, the Coroner goes: “Very demanding was she?” And the solicitor says, no, she was tearful, she didn’t know what was going on, she was confused.

And the Coroner goes again: “Demanding immediate answers?” You could see he’d made his mind up about her.

The jury didn’t have a choice. It’s clearly not suicide, so it’s misadventure. Which is the same as accidental. Just what the coroner promised. Even he knew there’d been a cover-up, because he said there should be an inquiry.

*(Reads):* “Kelly’s mother was at the end of her tether trying to do the best for her. Her frustration was compounded by the unfortunate cock-up...”

You don’t expect them to say cock-up in court do you? More than a cock-up. I’d call it...

“...of the inappropriate warrant...”

Inappropriate! It were wrong.

“... which brought Kelly to London, where she died. Kelly’s mother’s distress and indeed, palpable anger, was entirely understandable and the court services, at the very least, owe her a big apology indeed. No doubt there will be an inquiry into this matter. And I wish them luck in their quest in seeking answers to address her concern.”

I need more than luck. I need a bloody miracle.

So, there’s not been an inquiry and there’s not been a second inquest. Even though it’s obvious the first one were flawed. And a few months later he resigned, suddenly, that Coroner. The newspapers said he’d moved so no-one could find him.

Palpable anger. Well, it weren’t surprising after what I’d been through.

Am still going through.

*She clicks on the mouse and brings up some more files. She peers at them. They are not the files she wants. She clicks her tongue, irritatedly and gets the right files up.*

Right. There we are!

I wanted to show you this. You see, there's been all this recent argy bargy in the courts. Nothing happens, of course. But...

We've had two, what they call test cases about Article 2 Inquests. They've both come out completely different. So now it's Europe. It's up to them in Strasbourg. I've been trying to follow it

*She scrolls down the file.*

Right now. This is from the House of Lords. When was this? March 2007, I think. I lose track. Anyhow. This is ... wait a minute, it should say who was speaking ... yeah ... Lord Brown of Eaton-under Heywood.

They do have some names! So where was I?

*Reads:* "The Divisional Court in *Jean Pearson* –that's me – *v HM Coroner for Inner London North*, 2005..."

That's six years after Kelly died. They kept stalling and stalling. You had to wonder what were they trying to hide.

"The Court ... had to confront the very issue now arising. A new inquest into a pre-1998 Act death was there sought under section 13 of the 1988 Act on the ground of insufficiency of inquiry."

‘Insufficiency’. (*Sighs*) They must work hard to make it this difficult to read.

“The main argument before the court was that the coroner had conducted a *Jamieson* inquest”. Now I know that. That’s the inquest where no-one asks anything, like Kelly’s. “Whereas he should have conducted an Article 2 inquest.” Which is what I’m fighting for. “Lord Justice Maurice Kay rejected the argument and Judge Moses agreed.” Well, he would.

There’s another of these Lords or Justices or whoever. You know what he said? That if you made it retrospective, you might as well investigate the deaths by state action of the Princes in the Tower.

It’s rubbish, that’s just rubbish, and he should know better. The Princes in the Tower didn’t have an inquest after 2000. My argument is that we should have another inquest because the first inquest was after the Human Rights Act became law. There are a lot of lawyers who agree with me

What are they thinking? I’ll go away? I’ll give up? I’ll get bored of it all? I don’t know. Don’t they know what happens to a mother when she feels her daughter died needlessly?

**Scene 8*****That was the last time I saw my daughter***

*Jean finishes tidying the room. She smooths her hair. She is preparing herself.*

Bonfire Night it was. I told you I'd come back to that.

Kelly had been drinking and kicking off and, basically, I couldn't deal with it anymore. So I went up to my son's and I left her.

Next morning, there was this letter from the neighbours threatening me with court action if there were any more of it. They said they'd get the council to evict us because of the arguments. You know, the shouting and stuff. It were pushed through the door, no envelope, no nothing. And Kelly read it. So she were upset. Understandably.

Next afternoon, she's come over to her brother's flat and she's kicking off outside the flat, kicking off at her brother. All the windows are open, and I think, any minute somebody's going to ring the police.

And they come.

I...when they put her in the van...I were in pieces ...I were in pieces.

That was the last time I saw my daughter. In handcuffs.



When I got home the next day there was this message from Eccleshill Police Station about this warrant. This erroneous London Transport Warrant. So I ring the police station. “Well, look”, I say. “Can I, you know, bring her some clothes?” The policeman says: “We’d be delighted if you brought her some clothes.”

So I go across with some clothes. And this little policewoman comes and gets them off me, takes them so Kelly can get a shower and get changed. And she’s saying we can’t take any clothes, we don’t have the facilities. But I’m thinking, she’s going back to Holloway and will need some tops and knickers.

So I say: “She needs more than one pair of knickers, don’t she?” So she kind of sneaks ’em in. For some reason, she felt guilty about taking them in.

When she comes back after Kelly’s had her shower I ask to see Kelly. She says she has to ask the duty sergeant. Then she comes back and she says: “He won’t. He says no. There’s no officer to let us.”

Just facing us is a yard where they can walk and have a smoke. I found out, afterwards, that half an hour after I left that police station, Kelly were in that yard, having a smoke. It’s there in the documents. It’s there. They would not let me see my daughter. She were crying, that policewoman. She were. And she said, “She’s asked to see you”.

That’s how we had to leave it.

I never saw her again.

(Sighs) With hindsight. Oh, with hindsight. I wouldn't ... I wouldn't have...

You see, when she were kicking off outside her brother's, I were thinking, apart from all else this is a medical emergency. She's seen the psychiatrist. She won't do anything, she's got all this Valium. She's got money to drink. I'm going to be ending up calling an ambulance.

So I called the police. Me. I called the police.

Ten years, it doesn't get any easier.

I often think I'd like to write a book. Something that would help all those other mothers out there. Tell them. Tell them: talk. Talk before it's too late. I'll say. Don't make the mistakes I made. Fight. Fight the authorities while they're still alive and you won't have to fight them later.

I tell you summat, when I do write that book, I won't be holding names back. And I won't be holding nothing back, because I'll say it as it is. And I don't care if I end up in prison. Because I'll tell you why, I'll have all the prisoners revolting as well. I'll have them in revolt.

What can they do to me? Kill me, like they did me daughter?

Yeah. I'll take a few people with me before they do.

They're trash.

They're trash - the authorities are trash. The medical profession is trash. The police is trash. The probation is trash. The Government is trash. The Home Office is trash. The country's trash.

*Jean sips water.*

I sometimes feel that I'm channelling Kelly. She's here with me. I'm fighting her battles. I can't give up. Don't ask me to stop. I can't stop this now.

*She picks up phone and dials.*

Alan Johnson's Office? It's Mrs Pearson again. Kelly's mother. There's summat I've just found. It's about the first inquest of my daughter. Yeah. Get your files.

I'll wait. I'll wait.

*She picks up a pad and makes a note slowly, carefully as we hear the phone go dead and the dial tone grows until it fills the theatre.*

**BLACKOUT**

This play was written from the following sources:

Taped interviews with Jean Pearson, 2006 – 2008

Conversations with Jean Pearson, 2006 – 2008

Transcript of the Inquest into the death of Kelly Pearson, 25 April, 2002

Medical Records of Kelly Pearson at HMP Royal Holloway

Letters from Kelly Pearson to Jean and Sean Pearson from Holloway,  
1999

Transcript of the taped telephone conversation between Jean Pearson and  
Dr X (name not cited for reasons of confidentiality)

Prisons and Probation Ombudsman's Report into issues arising from the  
death of Kelly Pearson, 2004.

All the above material was provided by Jean Pearson and has been  
employed in this play with her generous permission.

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# **CUTS**

## **A Theatrical Installation**

**by Antoinette Moses**

**Based on verbatim transcripts**

The indication / in the text signifies that the speech runs on between characters.

This work is dedicated to the memory of Petra Blanksby, 1984 – 2003.

## **Act One**

### Space One

*There is a large screen which is initially black.*

*The sound installation begins: Doors and viewing windows in the doors bang, and in the distance, footsteps, some slow some fast. There are also distant voices. Women call out indistinctly. This is the underscore of Her Majesty's Prison and it continues throughout.*

*The screen now shows a concrete floor and the edge of a large stain of dried blood.*

*The foreground sound is sequentially:*

- *a metal bucket is placed down on the floor*
- *a scrubbing brush begins to scrub*
- *the brush stops*
- *the brush starts again*
- *the brush stops*
- *the bucket is dragged across the floor*
- *the brush stops again*
- *the brush is thrown into the bucket*

*The image on the screen changes as water is thrown over the stain which begins to dissolve. All sounds stop, and the screen turns to black.*

Space Two

*In this room is **PETRA BLANKSBY**, 18 years old. Her arms are bandaged to the elbow but blood has seeped through. She wears a baseball cap which covers her eyes. She sits in a world of her own holding a torn bed sheet. She is tearing it into a long strip which she then begins to plait to form a ligature. She smiles, as she always does before an act of attempted suicide. Behind her are a disposable razor, a roll of soft toilet paper and a soft teddy bear.*

*One wall is filled with box files. All have Petra's name written on them in a variety of different hands and the date of the contents. There is one from 1984 to 1990. There are about twenty files from 1990 to 2000. The remainder are from 2000 to 2003. Most are from 2003.*

*There are indistinct voices of women talking. An ambulance approaches and then drives away until its siren can no longer be heard. The women's voices become audible.*

<b>Woman 1 (V/O)</b>	It's like having a drink.
<b>Woman 2 (V/O)</b>	Quicker/
<b>Woman 1 (V/O)</b>	/like having a drink. But quicker.
<b>Woman 2 (V/O)</b>	You know how/
<b>Woman 1 (V/O)</b>	/how?
<b>Woman 2 (V/O)</b>	/ how your brain shuts down from pain?



- Woman 1 (V/O)** Yeah.
- Woman 2 (V/O)** Like the pain's bad.
- Woman 3 (V/O)** Christ, especially the next day.
- Woman 2 (V/O)** But how it calms you down.
- Woman 3 (V/O)** For a moment. For a moment you're/
- Woman 3 (V/O)** You're... It's like having a drink.
- Woman 2 (V/O)** Yeah. *Beat.* Could you/
- Woman 3 (V/O)** What?
- Woman 2 (V/O)** / tell anyone? I mean, if I told anyone I  
know how I cut, I'd be/
- Woman 1 (V/O)** /outcasted.
- Woman 2 (V/O)** It's like they're disgusted...
- Woman 3 (V/O)** At the housing, when they found out I was  
cutting, they kicked me out. I was on the streets two years.
- Woman 1 (V/O)** I can't stop. The more everything builds  
and the more problems that come, the deeper I cut.
- Woman 2 (V/O)** I have to punish myself.

*Petra listens.*

**Woman 2 (V/O)** I mean if I weren't bad they'd never have done them terrible things to me.

**Woman 3 (V/O)** That's all I ever heard. You're crap.

**Woman 2 (V/O)** Better off dead.

*Pause.*

**Woman 1 (V/O)** The nurse really hurt when she stitched me up.

*Sympathetic sounds from the other two women.*

**Woman 1 (V/O)** We got sick people here, she said. We don't need your lot.

**Woman 3 (V/O)** Yeah, they fucking hate you in A&E.

**Woman 1 (V/O)** They told me I was just trying to get attention. So I cut a bit of my ear off. *(Laughs)*

*The women laugh. Petra laughs with them. Silence. Petra takes out the razor and looks at it. We now hear the voices of **WOMEN SOCIAL WORKERS (WSW)**. What they say includes what has been said to Petra, but may also be what she is imagining. As they talk, Petra begins to dismantle the razor to get rid of the plastic. Once she has managed to get at the razor blade she begins to unravel one of her bandages. She rolls this up. She begins to cut herself. She bleeds.*

- WSW 1 (V/O)** The important thing is to engage.
- WSW 2 (V/O)** If she doesn't engage, there's little we can do.
- WSW 1 (V/O)** There's the child to think of/
- WSW 3 (V/O)** /The welfare of her child is the priority.
- WSW 2 (V/O)** Have you got the files?
- WSW 3 (V/O)** Which files?
- WSW 2 (V/O)** Last week's?

*Petra bandages up her arm again*

- WSW 3 (V/O)** She knows the terms of the Plan.
- WSW 1 (V/O)** She signed the Plan.

*A baby begins to cry.*

- WSW 2 (V/O)** So we take the child into care.
- WSW 1 (V/O)** As a temporary measure
- WSW 3 (V/O)** Of course. As a temporary measure.

*Petra takes the teddy bear and begins to rock it gently. The baby stops crying.*

**WSW 2 (V/O)**                      You have to think of the child.

**WSW 3 (V/O)**                      How old was Petra when she was taken  
into care?

**WSW 1 (V/O)**                      It should be in the file.

*Petra begins to wrap the razor blade in toilet paper.*

**WSW 3 (V/O)**                      Five/ Six?

**WSW 3 (V/O)**                      There were claims of abuse.

**WSW 2 (V/O)**                      It should be in the file.

*Petra puts the razor blade in her mouth.. She lies down. There is the  
sound of an approaching ambulance siren. Then the sound of the radio  
from within the ambulance. Enter two **PARAMEDICS**.*

**Paramedic 1**                      Yeah, it's Petra.

**Paramedic 2**                      Said she'd swallowed a blade.

**Paramedic 1**                      Looks like she may have taken some pills  
again, too. (*She checks for a pulse.*)

**Paramedic 2**                      Petra! Hallo, Petra, my love, open your  
eyes for me! Come on there! (*To Paramedic 1*) She's still breathing.

*They attach an oxygen mask to her face and carry her out.*

### Space Three

*There is a large screen above the acting area. Enter **LESLIE THOMAS**, a barrister. He is from London, elegant and tall, with dreadlocks tied behind his head. He acts on behalf of Petra's family.*

**Leslie** On 19<sup>th</sup> November 2003, Petra Blanksby, on remand in New Hall prison for having attempted suicide by setting fire to her bedding, tied a ligature around her neck. She died five days later in hospital.

*Enter **PETE BLANKSBY**, Petra's father. He has the look of a man whom life has battered, who hardly eats or sleeps. He has a soft voice with a Derbyshire accent.*

**Pete** They didn't let me speak at Petra's inquest. Not a word. I sat there silent for three weeks while they talked my daughter away. That's how it was. I'm not complaining. They had their reasons. It was for the best, Mr Thomas said. (*Leslie acknowledges this.*) I understand that. I try to do what's best. I've always tried...

**Leslie** Petra was just nineteen. Her inquest was held in January 2008.

**Pete** The questions keep coming. Like, why was my daughter sent to prison in the first place? Why was she not sent to a hospital for treatment? Why did it happen?

**Leslie** For five years the family didn't know how Petra died. Whether she'd used shoe laces or J-cloths. Her father, Pete, was concerned because he'd seen a pile of J-cloths in the prison chapel.

**Pete** I thought other women might be at risk the same way.

**Leslie** Five years is a long time in limbo.

**Pete** How do you wait? How do you go on living while you wait?

*Exit Leslie.*

*Enter PAULINE CAMPBELL. Early 60s, clearly frail, simply and elegantly dressed. How she looks matters to her. She begins to hand out photocopies\* to the audience as she moves through it. Pete watches her with a wry smile.*

**Pete** Pauline contacted me straight after Petra's death. She'd already started her campaign

**Pauline** My name is Pauline Campbell, mother of Sarah Elizabeth Campbell, who died at the age of 18 in the so-called care of Styal prison./ Good evening, my name is Pauline Campbell, may I give you this to read? Thank you.

**Pete** Hi Pauline.

**Pauline** Pete. How are you doing?

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\* See Text 1. Page 159.

**Pete**                      You know.

**Pauline** We can't let them get away with it.

Pete No.

*Pauline continues to move through the audience.*

**Pauline** Good evening, my name is Pauline Campbell, mother of Sarah Elizabeth Campbell, my only daughter who was killed by the State. May I give you this?/ Good evening, sorry to interrupt, but may I give you this? It explains about my daughter, who died at the hands of the State... Young women are dying in prison! Please take this. This matters!

*Pauline joins Pete on the stage area.*

**Pete** Finished?

**Pauline** I've got a prepared statement. Is it alright if I read it?

*Pete smiles and shrugs.*

**Pauline** (*Addresses the audience*) Petra's unnecessary death is a painful reminder of that fateful day on 18 January 2003, when my teenage daughter died in the so-called care of Her Majesty's Prison, Styal. My daughter should never have been sent to prison. Petra Blanksby should never have been sent to prison.

**Pauline cont.**                      The point is that many of these women who take their own lives are in need of mental health care, not punishment. The biggest problem is the overuse of prisons for all. I would like to quote Juliet Lyon, the director of the Prison Reform Trust. “We are locking up our most damaged and vulnerable women in bleak, under-staffed institutions, from which, despite the best efforts of many people, they are almost bound to emerge more damaged, more vulnerable. Some of them do not come out at all.” That is what I want to say today.

**Pete**                                      Well done.

**Pauline**                                  Was it alright? It wasn't too much, was it?  
I know today's about Petra.

**Pete**                                      It was fine.

**Pauline**                                  You look tired.

**Pete**                                      I don't remember the last time I slept. You know like a whole night.

**Pauline**                                  It's like the memory of something I used to do.

**Pete**                                      It's always there somewhere in the back of my mind. I can't go driving an arctic around Europe any more because I don't get no sleep. Be alright driving four hours down the road, then I could fall off. I could never live with that.



**Pauline**                                      Nobody ever thinks about that. What happens to the ones left behind.

**Pete**                                      I was by Petra's bedside in hospital for five days and four nights, holding her hand and watching her heartbeat going slower and slower until that last beat, which I was clinging on to because I just didn't want it to happen. Something inside me died that day.

I'm not a politician, but I can see that these things don't make sense.

*Exit Pete and Pauline.*

Space Four

## Wakefield Coroner's Court (1)

*Whenever we return to the Inquest we return to this space. A chair should represent the Coroner, and Leslie Thomas and the witnesses nod their heads to it as they go in and out of the witness box. Within the court, a group of prison officers are seated on one side. They are following the proceedings, but also act like a group on a day out, passing out sweets and chocolate to each other. On the other side are Pete and Leslie. General low pre-session buzz with Leslie conferring with Pete. Pete steps out of court to talk to the audience.*

**Pete**

Wakefield.

Petra died in New Hall prison in

**Leslie**

So the family and campaigners, counsel and solicitors set up camp for the three-week inquest when it finally arrives in January 2008.

**Pete**

for this.

Five years I've waited for answers. Waited

**Leslie**

...

And the first witness at Petra's inquest is

*Enter **LORRAINE HICKS**, early thirties, social worker. She enters the witness box and takes the oath.*

**Lorraine**

Lorraine Hicks.

**Leslie** Mrs Hicks... Is it OK if I call you that? I know you weren't married at the time you were working with Petra.

**Lorraine** That's fine.

**Leslie** Good. If I could put some background on this. Your role is to assist young people who are in that transitional period between being in foster care and becoming independent?

**Lorraine** Yes, I'm employed by the High Peaks Aftercare Team, working with young people who have been in care.

**Leslie** Those of us who have teenage children know that this is a difficult time.

**Lorraine** I'm there to help.

**Leslie** What do you provide for these children? Because although they are no longer officially children in care, they are still very young.

**Lorraine** Practical and emotional support.

*Enter Petra. She is not within the court itself. Her arms have been re-bandaged. She has a school exercise book and a biro. She sits on the floor, chewing the biro as she reads the questions. Then laboriously writes the answers.*

**Leslie** Such as?

**Lorraine** I find out their housing needs, assist them with forms, that kind of thing. Help them find out what courses they can do.

**Petra** (*writing*) Why have you come to do this course? To learn about my punctuation and spelling and how to write essays.

**Leslie** Your first meeting with Petra is 4<sup>th</sup> December 2002?

**Lorraine** Yes. She needs help finding a nursery place for her son.

**Petra** (*writing*) I think this will be a good course.  
Problems: I have a four-month-old son, so it could prove a bit hard sometimes.

**Lorraine** She says she's feeling low. Worried about her son.

**Petra** (*writing*) Working on punctuation: I was tired, comma, but despite people find ways to cope, full stop.

**Leslie** It's on the 9<sup>th</sup>, I think, she tells you she's feeling low.

*Lorraine nods.*

**Petra** I trudged along, comma, although all hope was lost, full stop.

**Leslie** On the 11<sup>th</sup> she leaves you a message that she's going to kill herself.

**Lorraine** I was petrified. I went round there. She didn't seem to be listening to me.

**Leslie** On the 12th she misses an appointment with her mental health social worker. It's he who acts as liaison between Petra and the mental health group and the hospital?

**Lorraine** Yes. She wants supportive lodging and/

**Petra** /Help.

**Lorraine** / help looking after her son.

**Leslie** On the 13<sup>th</sup> of December she's taken to hospital, to the coronary care unit, having taken twenty-eight beta blockers. On the 17<sup>th</sup> there is a planning meeting to discuss her needs, which includes her son's social worker.

**Lorraine**                      The child social care department asks the court to take her son into temporary care.

*Petra begins to dismantle the biro.*

**Leslie** This young girl who has until recently been in care herself is finding it hard to cope with a new baby on her own. Is she offered any respite from looking after her son?

**Lorraine**                      There are no vacancies. I tried. It was very frustrating. Petra's crying. The outreach worker says it's fully booked up. Resource problems. That's what we're told.

**Leslie** On the 18<sup>th</sup> of December, Petra in fact asks for her son to be taken into care. Suddenly she is all alone in that house.

**Lorraine** I was so worried about her. She kept changing her mind about her son. She wanted him looked after, but she didn't want to lose him.

**Leslie**                      You got on with Petra?

*Lorraine moves to Petra.*

**Lorraine** Petra was funny, she was fun to be with. She was absolutely brilliant with her son. She loved him. Though I had to teach her how to play. She knew about feeding and cleaning, but nobody had played with her as a child. She didn't know how to do it.

*She picks up the teddy bear and waves it as if to a baby. Petra takes the bear and copies Lorraine's actions. There is the sound of a baby laughing. Petra and Lorraine laugh.*

**Leslie** It all goes downhill from here. On the 28<sup>th</sup> of December Petra's taken to hospital again with an overdose.

*Lorraine moves back to the inquest.*

**Lorraine** She was diagnosed as having behavioural problems.

**Leslie** But she was diagnosed as not having a mental illness.

*Petra stabs herself with the biro. Pete stands up.*

**Pete** This is where I wanted to stop everything. How could they keep saying that Petra didn't have a mental illness?

*Enter **PSYCHIATRIST**. He watches Petra and is not in court. He addresses the audience, almost as a lecture.*

**Psychiatrist** Petra was diagnosed with borderline personality disorder. As a psychiatrist I feel I should explain this term as we're not all experts here. Borderline personality disorder is not a term which means that it is on the border of the condition, but is, in fact, a more severe type of emotionally unstable personality disorder.

**Leslie** On the ward, she tried to stab herself, she set fire to her hair using a deodorant spray as an improvised flame thrower.

**Psychiatrist** Personality disorder is learned behaviour, it is not an illness. You don't go down with a personality disorder as if it were a cold...you can't cure it with medication.

**Lorraine** She learned behaviour on the ward.

**Psychiatrist** In Petra's case, the in-patient situation did not reduce the risk she presented to herself.

**Leslie** In February there was discussion of finding Petra a place in a unit that deals with personality disorder, but she was not referred to such a unit.

**Lorraine** She didn't fit the criteria.

**Psychiatrist** Petra was not considered a suitable candidate for a therapeutic community, even if there had been a place available.

**Leslie** In four months we've moved from Petra begging for help to a stage where she's overdosing almost daily. Were you shocked?

**Lorraine** Yes, I was shocked.

**Leslie** In the weeks after Petra left hospital, she tried to hang herself, to throw herself off a bridge – that was the first time that the police were involved. She cut herself, she swallowed a watch battery, she tried to gas herself but was not successful as the gas had been cut off. She was not readmitted to hospital.

**Lorraine** They didn't want to admit Petra to hospital because she had a negative impact on others in the ward.

**Leslie** Effectively saying there was no place for her.

**Psychiatrist** A policy guideline was issued that she should be treated in A& E and not admitted to the psychiatric ward. Unless she developed another mental illness such as schizophrenia.



**Leslie**

**Leslie** So she was not re-admitted to the psychiatric ward.

## Psychiatrist

**Psychiatrist**                      Nothing would be achieved by her re-admission. She was equally at risk on the ward. Indeed any form of incarceration would intensify her symptoms. Let me repeat this. Petra's condition was not treatable. We don't keep people in hospital to stop them killing themselves.

*Psychiatrist exits. Petra begins to unravel her bandage and removes her cap to reveal a blonde pony tail. She is now Kirsty. She moves across to the witness box position.*

**Leslie**

Your name?

**Kirsty**

**Kirsty** Kirsty Blanksby. I was born on 19<sup>th</sup> July 1984 and I am the twin sister of Petra Blanksby.

*Blackout.*

### Space Five

*The audience are now in a space with several screens. There is room to move between them and hear each one separately. Although they play simultaneously and continuously on loops, the sound should not be cacophonous. Each screen is an extract from a debate in the House of Lords which has been reconstructed. The speakers are on their feet addressing the House.*

### *Screen One*

*Caption: Lords' Debate, 24 October, 2004*

**Baroness Stern**                      My Lords, this situation calls out for government action to remedy some gross injustices. Last year, the United Kingdom Government were found to be in violation of Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which forbids inhuman and degrading treatment, because of the way in which Judith McGlinchey was treated in an English prison. I recommend the Minister to read the judgment if he has not already done so, because I am certain that after reading it he will ask why this woman was sent to prison—to a place of punishment—for four months, for theft, when she clearly needed care and treatment.

The use of punishment is spreading more and more into territory that belongs to others. It is territory that belongs to the health services and the social services. It is not just bad policy that punishment should be used for health and welfare problems; clearly, it does not work—they are all dead. It is also deeply wrong, cruel and unjust.

*Screen Two*

*Caption: Lords' Debate, 20 October 2005*

**Lord Giddens** I have two questions for the Minister. Why are so many mentally ill young people sent to prison when they really should be receiving psychiatric care? Why do you not concentrate more on the nature of prisons and institutions rather than the individuals in them if you want to change some of these forms of self-destructive behaviour?

**Lord Ramsbotham** The noble Lord, Lord Dholakia, mentioned the report of the Joint Committee on Human Rights on deaths in custody. In that report, the Committee stated: "We are convinced that inappropriate reliance on the prison system is at the root of many deaths in custody. Many very vulnerable people are being held in prison unnecessarily, with no benefit to society". Why is this happening? Why are prisons full of those who everyone agrees should not be there?

I suggest this outcome is a direct result of Home Office policy. There are a number of areas, mainly in the towns and cities, where a range of social problems is concentrated: low incomes, dysfunctional families, drugs and mental illness. The Home Office, through its penal policies, has become the repository for the social, health and community problems that local areas feel they do not have the resources to solve.

*Screen Three**Caption: Lords' Debate, 9 June, 2005*

**Baroness Stern**                      This problem is not to be solved by removing more ligature points from cells or screwing beds to the floor so that they cannot be upturned and used as makeshift gallows, although such measures are important. The problem needs addressing at a high level, by the Home Office and the Department of Health working together to establish a permanent and cross-departmental expert task-force, with a remit covering all aspects of deaths in custody.

I note that the Government's reply to our report states: "Deaths in state custodial settings remain rare events". The use of the word 'rare' is interesting. Today is 9 June. The Minister will be aware that last Thursday, 2 June, a woman prisoner died allegedly by her own hand in Eastwood Park prison. Last Friday, 3 June, a man died allegedly by his own hand in Gloucester prison. On the same day, a man died on HM prison ship 'The Weare'. Last Sunday, 5 June, a man died in Bristol prison. The Minister is one of the most fluent and meticulous users of the English language that this House has had the opportunity and pleasure to listen to. Will she comment in her reply on the use of the word 'rare' in the Government's response?

*Screen Four**Caption: Lords' Debate, 10 November 2005*

**Baroness Andrews**                      My Lords, mental health problems dominate prisons like a massive black cloud. I really felt extraordinarily distressed that people in that degree of disturbance should be kept in eight by six toilets—and that is the situation. The NHS, by which I mean consultant psychiatrists, I fear, are not always as responsive as they should be—because patients are safe, are they not, in prison?

**Lord Rea**                                      Many mentally ill prisoners should not be in prison at all, but receiving treatment in mental hospitals or in the community. One reason for this is that mental hospitals are as overcrowded as prisons, if not more so. It is also simpler for judges to hand down a prison sentence than to go through the longer process of obtaining social and psychiatric reports and arranging a suitable placement.

*When enough time has lapsed for the audience to watch some of the different speeches, the screens go dark simultaneously. Then all show the following at a louder volume. All screens:*

**Baroness Stern**                              Punishment when she needed care and treatment/

**Lord Ramsbotham**                          Repository for social, health and community problems/

**Baroness Stern**                              Mentally ill people are being held in prison because there are not enough secure psychiatric places/

**Lord Rea**                                      Mentally ill prisoners should not be in prison at all.

*This then changes to all screens:*

<b>Baroness Stern</b>	Inhuman and degrading/
<b>Lord Ramsbotham</b>	Inappropriate/
<b>Baroness Stern</b>	Failure of the system/
<b>Lord Rea</b>	/Should not be in prison.

*The screens go dark.*

Space Four

## Wakefield Coroner's Court (2)

*As at the end of previous inquest scene. Kirsty has just entered the witness box and is being examined by Leslie. Pete and the Prison Officers are seated.*

**Leslie** Kirsty, if you could tell us a little about you and Petra. In your own words.

**Kirsty** My parents separated when I was four and Petra and I lived with my mother. We had a very difficult childhood.

**Leslie** You lived with your mother. There was, I believe, extensive mental and physical abuse.

**Kirsty** She made us stand in the corner for hours. Literally hours.

**Pete** Listening to this. Well you can imagine. I wanted to tell the inquest the whole story, but it was as if I were invisible.

**Kirsty** Sometimes we didn't get fed, we got locked in cupboards.

**Pete (To audience)** Like when Kirsty and Petra were born. You see, their mother never bonded with them, she didn't want anything to do with them ... I looked after them for six months right from when they were babies.

**Pete Cont.**

I had it all set up like a production line.  
*(Laughs)* Everything would be prepared, the changing mat, the bottles would be ready, the clean clothes. Then I'd bring them downstairs and I'd do one – change her, wash her. We used to have a chair, it had no arms on it, it was more like an armchair with no arms but I'd put one baby in with a cushion on one side, just prop the bottle up. And while she was drinking that, I'd be doing the next one. And that's how it went.

I had this little Escort van. I'd put them in side by side and have a drive round, show 'em off to all me mates. Go here there and everywhere. That's how it was ... I used to burp them ... I used to do everything. That first six months.

And I can't remember ever saying to myself I've had enough of this, I need to get out. I was in my early thirties, then. Their mother was about nineteen. And she was in bed suffering with post-natal depression. Later she started to look after them and I went back to work. I used to drive, you know, artics, big trucks all over the UK. Sometimes I'd be away all week and their mother seemed to be coping. Well, she must have been or I wouldn't have left them with her.

Then it all went downhill. We separated. That were a whole other story. Some things in your life you just wish things could have been different. I was away; I had a new family.

**Kirsty**

The police use to find us wandering the streets at night.

**Leslie**

How old were you, at this point?



**Kirsty** About seven. When we were nine, Petra and I were taken into care and placed in foster homes, mostly in separate placements.

**Leslie** Separate?

**Kirsty** I was with one family and Petra was brought in later but there were lots of arguments. We were fighting too much. But then, we'd been trained to work against each other.

**Leslie** But you were close?

**Kirsty** Someone, I don't remember when, told me a description of twins she'd read, like we're magnets but back to front, pulling and pushing. That were us, me and Petra. Together but apart. Pulling and pushing. And it weren't helped by we were always set against each other. Petra was the good girl... I was... But, yeah, we understood each other.

**Leslie** If I could skip forward a few years. You met up later?

**Kirsty** We were diagnosed with twin syndrome. You read about twins. When they get separated and then find each other. They're both married to someone called Edward or they're both working as hairdressers and have the same haircut.

Petra and me found each other in Tameside Hospital when we were fourteen. *(Laughs)* We were both on the ward. I'd taken an overdose and she found out I was there and visited me. I could see all the scars on her arms from the cutting. I called her stripy.

**Leslie** Did you have any counselling as children?

**Kirsty** We were sent for psychiatric assessment.

**Leslie** Did you think you were being taken seriously?

**Kirsty** Not a chance.

**Leslie** It was a cry for help?

**Kirsty** A lot of people use the term cry for help without knowing what it means

**Leslie** What do you think it means?

**Kirsty** They need help. People see it as the same as attention seeking which it isn't.

**Leslie** You, yourself, were diagnosed with borderline personality disorder.

**Kirsty** Yes.

**Leslie** But you got treatment?

**Kirsty** I was lucky. I got into Main House.

**Leslie** Which is an in-patient facility for personality disorders. How did you get in?

**Kirsty** I had to get through the selection process. Had to be willing to be treated. It was voluntary residential I had to agree to stay for a year. That's what makes it ... (*her voice breaks*).

**Leslie** (*concerned*) You can stop this any time you want to.

**Kirsty** No. I'm OK. It's that... if Petra hadn't died, I'd never have got treatment myself. When she died I got a lot worse. I was cutting, od-ing, I swallowed razor blades. I burned my arms, tried to jump off buildings. If I hadn't got help...

**Leslie** Help?

**Kirsty** Yeah. From Inquest and my lawyer. They fought, and I mean fought, to get me a place. That's why I'm alive.

**Leslie** But Petra never got a place?

**Kirsty** Petra should be alive. She shouldn't have been in prison. She wanted to work with animals. She was brilliant with horses. After her son went into temporary foster care Petra really lost it. She knew what could happen when you were in care.

**Leslie** She suffered abuse in care?

*Kirsty nods, overcome.*

**Pete** It's like a pattern. Like what happened to me when I was in care.

**Kirsty** I should have had a chance to see Petra, to say goodbye. Two weeks before she died, Petra sent me a visiting order, I never got it in time.

**Leslie** Because you were in hospital?

**Kirsty** Yeah. I'd taken an overdose. The day after I got out, there was this phone call. They said Petra was in intensive care. I never got to speak to her again. I'll never forgive them that. I should have had a chance to say goodbye.

**Leslie** Yes.

**Kirsty** What I still don't understand is why the psychiatrists keep saying that Petra wasn't treatable.

**Leslie** Because you yourself received treatment?

**Kirsty** Whatever it means to them, Petra thought it meant nothing could be done for her. It was one of the reasons she gave up. That and not finding anywhere that would take her. I cut myself, I tried to kill myself. And they said I wasn't treatable, too. But I got treatment. I'm alive.

*Kirsty goes over to join Pete.*

**Pete** You OK, love?

**Kirsty** *(tearful)* Yeah.

**Pete** That must have been so hard.

**Kirsty**                                      This whole inquest. It's like a story being told and you're sat there and the story is also about you.

**Pete**                                      Yeah. And you're hearing things, but not able to say well this was the reason.

**Kirsty**                                      All the questions they don't answer.

**Pete**                                      It's like no-one ever saw Petra as a person. If they'd got to know her, they could have done something.

*Blackout.*

Space Six

*A number of installations are revealed which the audience can now inspect.*

INSTALLATION 1*The Treatability Test*

*There is a line of fruit machines. The fruit symbols have been replaced by symbols of self-harm and medication. When you play them ( and they should be playable), you only win when you can line up the symbols for medication (injections/pills).*

INSTALLATION 2*The Mental Health Maze*

*This is a constructed maze of white corridors. It has no exits other than the entrance through which the audience accesses it. The dead ends of the maze have the following signs:*

*Not eligible*

*No resources available*

*Not suitable*

*Treatment unavailable*

*Closed*

*Closed due to funding reallocation*

*No beds available*

*Waiting list six months*

*There are a number of pieces of paper pinned and stuck to some of the walls. Some are lying on the ground as if discarded. Some are typed, some look as if they have been torn out of books or magazines.*

*Some are hand-written. Some of the texts (which are in Texts 2, p.172) are written on the walls themselves, like graffiti.*

*Within the Maze are two other installations, door and sign:*

### *DOOR*

*This is a door labelled: Group Therapy. It is locked. A sign on the door says: Two year Waiting List*

### *SIGN*

*There is a circle of words on the floor which reads:*

*BORDERLINE PERSONALITY DISORDERS – THIS WAY*

### *INSTALLATION 3*

### *The Government Inquiry*

*The walls of this space are covered with a visualisation of the welcome address made to those giving evidence for the many reports, consultation exercises and inquiries held over the past ten years on the issues around the mental health of prisoners and self harm and suicide of prisoners, particularly women. ( Text 3, p.177)*

*There is a sound installation on a loop. The sounds should be slow with long pauses between them.*

- *Pages of a thick document are ruffled*
- *Chairs scrape on a wooden floor as people sit down*
- *Pages of a thick document are ruffled*
- *Chairs scrape on a wooden floor as people get up.*
- *Pages of a thick document are ruffled*

INSTALLATION 4*Save the Henderson*

*A long piece of green wire fence to which a number of cards, some with flowers etc. have been tied with ribbons. Behind the wire is a sign which reads: Henderson Hospital.*

*The cards are hand written with the following:*

*Please Save the Henderson!*

*This hospital has been the only place researching Borderline Personality Disorder.*

*I'd be dead without this place!*

*I'm too upset to write more than: NO. This mustn't happen. We need the Henderson.*

*The Henderson Hospital is a globally respected institution and is the model for many therapeutic community treatment centres around the world. Don't let it die!*

*Save the hospital that saved my life!*

*I spent ten years in and out of hospitals before I came here. There's nowhere else for people like me. This country needs the Henderson!*

**HOW MANY LIVES WILL END BECAUSE OF GOVERNMENT  
BUREAUCRACY?**



*I feel terrible for all the people out there who won't be able to get treatment here.*

*The only reason the Henderson is closed because the way its funding changed. There used to be a massive waiting list. We need more places like the Henderson.*

*If it wasn't for the Henderson, I'd be dead. I was a patient here for a year and there's nowhere else like it. Before I went in I self-harmed, I took drugs, I was violent. I'd been in and out of psychiatric wards for years. None of the drugs they gave me helped. It weren't easy. But the staff and the other residents were there for me every day. I got through it. I'm off all medication. I haven't self-harmed for two years. I've got my family back. I just can't understand why they are closing this hospital.*

***THIS IS A NATIONAL DISGRACE!***

*Please help! Save the Henderson*

*A printed sign beside the wire reads:*

*A year ago, the Henderson Hospital received national funding, and had a six-month waiting list. But then funding passed to local NHS trusts, and referrals dwindled.*

*Several laminated copies of the press release from the trust are also attached to the wire. They read:*

*From the office of the Communications Director of the South West London and St Georges Mental Health NHS Trust.*

*The Henderson is a 29-bed NHS therapeutic community which provides intensive residential group therapy for adults with complex and enduring emotional and behavioural problems diagnosable as moderate and severe personality disorder.*

*The model provided by the Henderson relies on a minimum number of residents always being present in order for the therapeutic community to be clinically viable and effective. There are currently only five residents and the residents and clinicians have decided together that this number is too low for the Henderson to deliver its customary model of care.*

*Following discussions between residents and clinicians at the Henderson Hospital on 2nd April 2008, the decision was taken that the Henderson's residential service was no longer clinically viable, and we have had to temporarily close the Henderson. Should there be sufficient referrals of people for admission at the same time, which would allow the therapeutic community to be re-established and make the service clinically viable, the Trust will reopen the hospital.*

#### INSTALLATION FIVE

#### *Bedlam Park*

*On one screen are images of a beautiful country park and in the distance a large country house.*

*Background sound: sounds of a summer idyll: tennis being played on an outside court, birdsong.*

*Foreground audio is an **ESTATE AGENT**.*

**Estate Agent (V/O)**            Welcome to Bedlam Park. Discover the best of both worlds, a mere twelve miles from the city centre with its shops and cafes, yet enjoying the peace and quiet of rural England.

Here within this former hospital, you will find a blend of exquisite Victorian architecture complemented by cutting edge interior design. Urban chic meets rural tranquillity in one hundred acres of landscaped parkland.

In Bedlam Park, you'll be a member of an exclusive community enjoying a wide range of facilities.

Book your future in Bedlam: The best of contemporary living in a world created by tradition.

*The screen goes black.*

*After viewing the installations, the audience moves back to Space Four.*

Space Four

## Wakefield Coroner's Court (3)

*Continuation of Petra's Inquest. Those present as before. Enter **DR KEITH RIX**, a confident professional in his late-50s. Dr Rix enters the witness box.*

**Dr Rix**

Dr Keith Rix.

**Leslie**

You are a consultant forensic psychiatrist.

*Dr Rix nods.*

**Leslie**

Dr Rix, let me go through this swiftly. You have a degree in neurophysiology, you are a qualified Bachelor of Medicine and a Bachelor of Surgery. You have obtained degrees of Master of Philosophy and Doctor of Medicine and you're a Member of the Expert Witness Institute, one of the first to be elected Fellow.

**Dr Rix**

That is correct.

**Leslie**

And you are here at the inquest into the death of Petra Blanksby as an expert witness.

**Dr Rix**

Yes.

**Leslie**

In your report for this court, you say that you cannot fault the way she was treated by the psychiatrists but that Petra was frustrated and agitated that no-one was able to help her.

**Dr Rix**

Yes.

**Leslie** Petra was told she was untreatable.

**Dr Rix** That does not mean that the condition does not respond to some forms of treatment. There is a growing but still uncertain body of evidence that unstable personality disorder, out of all the personality disorders, is one that is most responsive to therapy.

**Leslie** But it would not benefit from in-hospital treatment?

**Dr Rix** Detention of any kind aggravates the condition. Whether it's a secure hospital or a prison. However, there are a number of people who would have been treated in in-patient wards who now find themselves in prison.

**Leslie** You're saying that the number of prisoners has increased as the number of hospital places has decreased?

**Dr Rix** Undoubtedly. There are such large numbers of people like Petra that there are not enough hospital beds to accommodate them.

**Leslie** You feel that we need to do something to address this?

**Dr Rix** I personally feel that, and so do a lot of younger people in my profession. Perhaps it is different with those who plan and manage services, those who make policy decisions.

**Leslie** Would it be overly cynical to suggest that the reason is financial?

**Dr Rix** No. I don't think it would. Some of the people who make decisions regarding mental health are affected by budgets and so on and some of these decisions are generated by financial considerations. You have to understand that people with Petra's condition are very demanding of staff time. Many mental health workers are reluctant to get involved with people like Petra because there would be some instance of fatal self-harm.

**Leslie** The condition is one that carries a high risk of death by accident.

**Dr Rix** Some consultants are keen to pass on patients with personality disorder to other members of the health service. This attitude led to a famous comment by Professor John Gunn, "If psychiatry gives up on people with personality disorders, then psychiatrists should not be surprised if people give up on psychiatry."

*Blackout.*

Space Seven

*A court room.*

*Enter **JUDGE JACOBS**, two barristers, **MR WILSON** and **MR CLARE**, a **COURT OFFICIAL** and **REBECCA GIDNEY**.*

**Court Official**                      The Crown Court Norwich, 30th June 2005. Before His Honour Judge Jacobs, appearing for the Prosecution, Mr Wilson. Appearing on behalf of Rebecca Gidney ... Mr Clare.

**Mr Clare**                              Can I explain about Rebecca Gidney, please?

**Judge Jacobs**                      I know a hell of a lot about Rebecca Gidney, Mr Clare.

*Enter **MR GIDNEY***

**Judge Jacobs**                      Sorry, who is the gentleman who has come into court?

**Mr Clare**                              He's Miss Gidney's father.

**Judge Jacobs**                      The concern I have is that the only sentence I can pass is imprisonment. But these psychiatrists have put me in that position. I am absolutely stuck, unless anybody comes up with a solution that is in her interests as well.

**Mr Clare**                              Miss Gidney's father is trying to find her a place and he has with him this morning a leaflet regarding a hospital called the Henderson Hospital in Sutton. That is not something that your Honour can make an order about.

**Judge Jacobs**

Mr Wilson?

**Mr Wilson**

Your Honour, on 1st June of this year, officers were called to attend to the Jarrold store in Norwich where Miss Gidney was locked in the toilets. There appears to have been some sort of self harm issue in relation to that. Officers then retrieved a kitchen knife and dismantled disposable razor blades from Miss Gidney. She was detained in custody and found at a later stage to have a razor blade concealed in her mouth. She handed that over to officers and those are the facts, unless your Honour wishes me to deal with them any more fully than that. Your Honour has seen the antecedents?

**Judge Jacobs**

There's no need to go through the antecedent history in this case. I've got it in front of me here. I have also seen reports. Perhaps the most important report I have seen is the psychiatric report which was prepared by a clinical psychologist last year. Mr Clare?

**Mr Clare**

There was no threat of harm to any other person other than the defendant herself. Rebecca Gidney did not try to harm police officers. She was remarkably cooperative throughout this incident which seems to have been something of an attention seeking exercise.

**Judge Jacobs**

Rebecca Gidney, if you would stand up please? I have to deal with you for an offence of possessing a bladed article. I take into account your guilty plea, the mitigation raised by Mr Clare, the fact that there was no actual threat of any harm to others. It is obvious to me that when you come out from prison, you will need help.



**Judge Jacobs cont.**            The sentence I am going to pass upon you is twelve months imprisonment of which you will serve a maximum of half, and any time in custody will be taken off.

I will express concerns publicly that I have no other way of managing your case other than sending you to prison, but there ought to be some other form of secure unit where you could get the treatment and help you need. The psychiatrist is saying that it is not appropriate in this case and my hands are tied. That is all I can say. I am going to adjourn.

*End of Act 1*

## Act Two

### Space Four

### *Wakefield Coroner's Court (4)*

*Leslie and Pete and Kirsty and Prison Officers are in their places. General low pre-session buzz with Leslie conferring with Pete and Kirsty. **MR BUNTING**, a duty solicitor, enters hurriedly and goes over to the witness box. Leslie brings Bunting some files and he begins to rifle through them anxiously. He then mimes the oath.*

**Bunting** I regret to say that I have little recollection of this case ... I might have been duty solicitor...

**Leslie** Allow me to refresh your memory. It's July 7<sup>th</sup> 2002.

**Bunting** Yes. According to the file it seems I dealt with Petra Blanksby at the police station. It was an attempted suicide.

**Leslie** In the morning, Petra Blanksby contacts her mental health team and tells them she's tried to gas herself but the gas was cut off.

**Bunting** Ah... yes.

**Leslie** If ever there was a cry for help this was it. But she is not admitted to hospital, as we have already explored in this court. In the evening she sets fire to her bed.

**Bunting** (*Hesitantly*) Yes. (*Turns to the file*)

**Bunting cont.** In her statement she says, (*Reading from file*) “I was extremely depressed. The gas was turned off. I set fire to my duvet...” She was worried that the fire might spread and injure her neighbours so she rang the fire brigade. (*Reading*) “When I heard sirens, I ran off”.

**Leslie** Her intention was self harm.

**Bunting** Yes. She was charged with arson, being reckless to whether life was endangered. This is a less serious charge than arson with intent.

**Leslie** But she was still facing a possible jail sentence.

**Bunting** Was she? Let’s see... She was remanded in custody at the magistrate’s court. I wasn’t there myself.

**Leslie** Do you know if a decision was made not to apply for bail?

**Bunting** I can’t remember. Ah. (*Reading the files.*) No application was made for bail. But this isn’t the sort of case I’d have expected bail ...

**Leslie** You set about the task of preparing her case. There is also the matter of the adoption of her son which she is opposing. Both hearings are set for the same day.

**Bunting** It was a very tight schedule. We made an application for the adoption hearing to be postponed a day or two.

- Leslie** Did you discuss this with Petra?
- Bunting** I don't think I had a meeting.
- Leslie** Would it have been difficult to arrange a meeting?
- Bunting** Maybe difficult to fit it in at short notice.  
Not a drop of a hat job.
- Leslie** But if you need to see your client urgently it can be arranged?
- Bunting** Urgent is a bit tricky, but two or three days is not an issue if you need to see a client.
- Leslie** So access to Petra would not be a problem.  
Did you see her?
- Bunting** I wouldn't be able to tell you without access to that year's diary. But we may be barking up the wrong tree as I can see we wrote to the court asking if they could accommodate a change of date.
- Leslie** We are talking about a really important decision regarding her sentence and the adoption of her son.
- Bunting** It doesn't appear from the files that there was a meeting. The only liaison there might have been with Petra was through her mental health team.

**Leslie** What pressures may have been brought on Petra at this stage of her life? We know she's self-harming and we know there's a sentence hearing and an adoption hearing which unfortunately have been scheduled for the same day. Did anybody, bearing in mind her mental state, suggest that the adoption hearing be postponed.

**Bunting** I don't think so.

**Pete** (*to the audience*)            She changed her mind about the adoption.  
She rung from prison and told us she'd changed her mind and said it  
were too late. Her son meant everything to her.

**Leslie** So Petra has a hearing regarding the fire.

**Bunting**                      The judge was very sympathetic to her case. He wanted a report from the psychiatrist.

**Leslie** Was any issue raised during that hearing about the adoption hearing and how that might have impacted on Petra?

**Bunting** I don't think so.

**Leslie** There doesn't appear to be any joining up with what was happening in the criminal proceedings and what was happening in the family court. If we could go to bundle three. (*To audience*) For those of us with the good fortune to have tabs, it is tab number 9, for those who haven't, it's page 96 and for those of us who have appalling pagination in our bundles, sorry.

*Bunting picks up another bundle of files. Bunting is reading the file and the case is now coming back to him.*

**Bunting** It was most unusual. Petra pleaded guilty. The judge wanted to adjourn but Petra wanted it over and done with.

**Leslie** You warned her of the maximum sentence.

**Bunting** Petra said go ahead. The judge was unhappy at the sentencing because he wanted more reports. We'd made enquiries if there was anywhere else she could go...a suitable secure setting. But we hadn't found her a place.

**Leslie** Petra understood that she would be sent to prison?

**Bunting** My colleague attended the court. She reported that Petra was an intelligent girl who understood the issues and sentencing options.

**Leslie** Did your colleague know about the situation with her child?

**Bunting** I don't think she did.

**Leslie** The psychiatrist consulted advised that the defendant's solicitors find her a secure unit where she could be assessed.

**Bunting** Everyone agreed that would be the best.

**Leslie** (*consulting the file*) You made various enquiries at Tameside, Hazelwood, Webb House. Why did they say no to her?

**Bunting** I don't know.

**Leslie** No-one was able to offer her a place.

**Bunting** No.

**Leslie** What discussions were there with Petra?  
Who kept her informed?

**Bunting** As far as I'm aware, nobody.

*Exit Bunting. Enter Dr Rix.*

**Leslie** Dr Rix, you are still here as an expert witness in this case?

**Dr Rix** Yes.

**Leslie** If we could go back to the time when Petra was self-harming. One of the manifestations of borderline personality disorder is self-harming. And as a psychiatrist you would need to deal with the deep-rooted issues behind this.

**Dr Rix** Yes.

**Leslie** If there were an obvious trigger, that's something you'd be concerned about? If you could identify such a trigger in any way.

**Dr Rix** You would seek to address that issue.

**Leslie** You might help them avoid the issue, anticipate the problem and offer coping strategies.

**Dr Rix** That would be standard psychiatric practice.

**Leslie** In the case of a bereavement, for example, you'd look at obvious things like anniversaries.

**Dr Rix** Yes. One might arrange to see them so many days before such an event.

**Leslie** Dr Rix, let me put it to you that the adoption of her son is a key moment in this woman's life. This is surely a trigger...

**Dr Rix** If I saw that in the notes, I'd want her bereavement to be part of the care plan for the foreseeable future.

**Leslie** Why is the loss of a child like a bereavement?

**Dr Rix** We use the term bereavement because of the particular attachment and the distress caused when that attachment is broken. Other forms of separation, other than death, can leave the same sense of emptiness and loss. In this case the loss of a child, an only child, would have generated considerable anguish – never seeing him again...could have I done more?... all the emotions associated with bereavement.



*Kirsty is very upset and Pete takes her out of court to have a cigarette.*

**Pete** *(to the audience)* We've got photos of the last time she were with her son. You can see the pain on her face.

**Kirsty** *(to the audience)* She didn't really want to give him up.

**Pete** *(to the audience)* For me it's like I've not only lost a daughter, I've now lost a grandson. And all through her being sent to prison. I'm sure, a hundred per cent sure, that if it had been allowed we could have helped Petra. And if not Petra, we could have had her son. And then she'd not have lost him. But we were never offered that opportunity.

I don't know what happened. It's never come out. They might have said, "Do you want to get in touch with your dad?" Petra might have said no, but we don't know. They might not have even mentioned it. They might have thought no, we won't ask him.

They never come to us. At Petra's funeral there was a woman there taking photographs and putting them in his kind of life book and she promised us every year we'd get photographs of him. And a report on how he's doing. We've had nothing. Not a thing.

*They return to the court.*

**Leslie** Dr Rix, help me with this. If you became aware of this trigger, the loss of her son, would you expect to see a mention of this in the notes?

**Dr Rix** Yes.



**Leslie**

Prison is not the answer?

**Dr Rix**

I would like to think that in a civilised society someone as severely mentally disordered as Petra should have been in the care of ordinary or forensic psychiatric services and not in prison. However, mental health law, as it was at the time, did not allow this and there were no appropriate NHS facilities.

**Leslie**

And are there such facilities now?

**Dr Rix**

The number of psychiatric beds has gone down steadily, while at the same time, we are building more and more prisons. If we looked at the situation objectively – as if someone from Mars was viewing the situation – it might be concluded that many people are in the wrong establishments.

*Dr Rix exits.*

**GOVERNOR ARKLE**, *a smartly-dressed woman, late 30s, moves into the witness box.*

**Leslie**

Governor Arkle, can I lay out my stall, so you know where I'm coming from? Not to do with this specific case – I know you weren't at New Hall at the time of Petra's death – but the issues involved. May I start by highlighting the differences for men and for women in prison? One of the main differences is the impact on their home life.

**Arkle**

Definitely. For a start, women are the primary carers of their children.

**Leslie** You would agree that when a man comes out of prison, he generally still has a partner at home and a family, when a woman comes out that is not the case. More often than not the entire home life becomes disrupted. In addition, there are often concerns that they are losing their homes.

**Arkle** These are common themes.

**Leslie** I would like to quote from the report written last year by Baroness Corston. The women she found in prison were mostly mothers. Some had their children with them immediately prior to custody, others had handed them to relatives or their children had been taken into care or adopted. Some were pregnant and some discovered they were pregnant when they had no idea that that could be a possibility. These women were drug users and alcoholics, they often looked very thin and unwell and many of them had been sexually, emotionally and physically abused. Moreover they had mental health problems and self harmed.

*Arkle nods.*

**Leslie** How many of your prisoners have mental health problems?

**Arkle** Around seventy percent. A much higher percentage, sometimes as high as ninety-five percent of women in prison, have suffered some form of abuse, from domestic violence to child abuse.

**Leslie** You've said that your prison operated at capacity for the last three months.

*Arkle's telephone goes off. The ring tone is the Crazy Frog. She is very embarrassed and quickly stops it.*

**Arkle** *(To the Coroner's chair)* I'm so sorry, sir. *(Jokingly)* I could be arrested for that!

**Leslie** You could be arrested for that ring tone!

*General laughter.*

**Leslie** So. That must make it hard when you have problems of staff shortages, staff sickness and high instances of self harm.

**Arkle** There is only so much a prison officer can do.

**Leslie** To quote once more from the Report. Baroness Corston notes that over one ten-day period she observed several instances of severe self-harm, a woman in the segregation unit with mental health problems on a dirty protest and a pregnant woman taken to hospital to have early induced labour over concerns about her addicted unborn child and who went into labour knowing that the Social Services would take the baby away shortly after birth.

Additionally, there was a woman who set fire to herself and her bedding and a crack cocaine addict displaying disturbing and paranoid behaviour. Not a day at the office that any of us would care to contemplate!

**Arkle** Cutting and mutilation is very common. Petra was not an isolated example.

**Leslie** So the ordinary prison officer has to deal with a number of very damaged and disturbed women. Prison officers have a number of duties in addition to watching someone who is in danger of suicide.

**Arkle**                      There's a long list.

**Leslie** Thank you, Governor.

## Blackout

Space Eight*A pub*

**SCOTTISH DAVE** *is sitting at a table drinking a pint.*

**Scottish Dave**

You won't hear what prison officers really think in a court. Because we can't show how angry we are. I work in a woman's prison.

I can't say where. Same problems as at New Hall. We're doing the jobs that should be done in mental hospitals and drug treatment centres. Except we don't have the training. And when we do have a bit, it just makes us realise how much we really need.

It's like everyone says, most of these women shouldn't be here. They should be in some kind of mental institutions. But we don't fund these any more, so it's put everybody back into the community and let prison pick up the pieces when that policy doesn't work. And these women get worse in prison. Even the governors admit that.

Women with personality disorders are difficult. Mind you, I can remember when they were called disordered. And that don't go down well in prison. Prisons like order, you see. Do what you're told. Don't cut or we'll take away your privileges.

The governors hate the disorders, if you want the truth, because they use up all the resources. They take up too much staff time keeping them alive. And we've got staff shortages. Hardly surprising though. When was the last time you got spat at, vomited over or watched someone die?

We all carry plastic covered blades because you never know, any moment ... we call them fish – they're shaped like fish. Any moment. Every day. If you're a few minutes too late, you'll end up in court. Yeah, you save a life every day, but when one of the girls outwits you, you're in the dock. And you get these clever lawyers who act for the families twisting your words, making out like it's your fault. No-one ever asks the families, "where were you when your daughter needed you, before she got on the drugs or the drink?"

It's not worth it. That's why I'm getting out. A postman, actually. Otherwise...well, you asked why I do it. And I've thought about that. Because it isn't the money. That's a joke.

Tell me, how do people look at you when you tell them what you do? You say you're a p.o., you know, a prison officer, and they look at you as if you're scum. I don't understand it. What is it we do that's so wrong, look after the people you don't want to think about? The Government makes it worse. They hate prison officers. You can tell. They try to stop us getting paid when we go on the sick. Sometimes we just need to get away. Dealing every night with these women who are trying to outwit you by finding a new way to ligature or cut themselves.

So why've I stuck it so long? It's the team. The way we support each other. You never get that outside. Yeah, I guess, like the army. And we are at war. No, not the prisoners. It's them lot in court, you, the outsiders, the do-gooders, the Government. By and large we get on with the women, I feel sorry for them. They need help. We can't give it.



Space Nine

*Pete's home*

*A chair, and a coffee table. There is a sound system with radio on a shelf.  
Enter Pete on his mobile.*

**Pete**

Oh, hi Pauline, Ok. Yeah.

*He switches off the phone and turns on the radio. Sits down to listen.*

**Bob Russell V/O**

First, I should declare an interest as the company that makes the plastics suitable for safe cells is within my own constituency.

**Pete**

Petra could have been moved into a safe cell, but she wasn't.

**Bob Russell V/O**

For many years now, I've spoken out in the House of Commons about the unacceptably high number of suicides in prison. Suicide rates in prison are ten times higher than the rate in the community outside and many of those who die in prison shouldn't even be there in the first place. Two thirds of suicides are by prisoners on remand – people who have not been convicted of a crime. Yet remand prisoners constitute only about a fifth of the prison population, and many remand prisoners are subsequently found not guilty or given a non-custodial sentence.

Now, my argument is that if safe cells were installed, particularly for remand prisoners and those with a known psychiatric history the numbers would drop.

**Bob Russell V/O Cont.** Remand prisoners often experience the worst conditions in the prison system. They are remanded to overcrowded local prisons with limited facilities and over-stretched resources. It is not unusual for such prisoners to be confined to their cells for twenty three hours a day.

**Pete** Same old story.

**Bob Russell V/O** Something needs to change. Improved regimes, more purposeful time made available to prisoners rather than them locking them up around the clock; careful screening to identify those with potential suicidal tendencies; and a determination to stop putting people in prison when a psychiatric place is more appropriate.

However, more needs to be done. If safe cells were more widely introduced in prisons, the figure would be reduced even further. The message is clear: safe cells save lives.

**Pete** It would be better if they weren't in prison in the first place.

**Bob Russell V/O** Let me put this in context. We know from Government figures that the cost of a fatal road accident is one million pounds, but what is the cost of a suicide in prison? Because it is cost that is preventing the installation of safe cells.

The kind I am talking about is a single self-contained unit comprising moulded items of immovable and unbreakable furniture. A bed, a table and a chair form part of the structure, as does a toilet and wash basin.

**Bob Russell V/O Cont.** All plumbing and electrics are encased in the moulding, and there are no hooks or fittings to which a ligature could be attached..

Of course, these cells will cost more than traditional cells – I am told about an extra ten thousand pounds per cell – but maintenance costs are much lower. Most importantly, they save lives.

*Pete turns off the radio.*

**Pete (To audience)** I thought Petra's inquest would give me answers, but it didn't. I've still got so many questions. Why was Petra not on the prison hospital wing? Why wasn't there a resident psychiatrist in prison? Why are our prisons at breaking point? How many more fathers and mothers are going to have to go through what I go through every day?

*Exit Pete*

Space Ten

## Prison Installations

*INSTALLATION 1**The prison entrance*

*A narrow corridor. There are three metal doors which are unlocked and locked behind them. The sound of this is amplified. There is no way out of the prison installations except through these doors.*

*INSTALLATION 2**The Wing.*

*A corridor on each side of which are open cells. From the corridor cells can be seen. Some (as indicated) are open to allow total visibility, others can be viewed through letterbox slots. Above the cells is a higher level for prison officers (POs) who patrol along here.*

***LIZA** is kicking her metal door, the sound reverberates. Prisoners are shouting at her to stop. A woman PO, **LINDSAY**, enters on the higher level.*

**Lindsay**

Liza! Liza! Enough. (*Shouts*) Liza, will you stop doing that and shut up! There are girls who want to sleep!

***KELLY** is a frail woman in her forties. Her arms are bandaged all the way to her elbow. She climbs up high enough to make her visible to all the audience, but not at PO level.*

**Kelly** (*to the audience*) For one moment, I'd just like you to imagine having that noise all night, and night after night. And having to wait till morning before you can queue up to be given a paracetamol – if you're lucky and the nurse is in a good mood and you don't get elbowed out of the queue by some poor sod gone crazy waiting for her methadone.

**Lindsay** (*to the audience*) For one moment, I'd just like you to imagine coming to work each night, not knowing what's going to happen when you open a cell door. Am I going to find someone who's hanging? Ligatured? There's always a fear; it never leaves you.

**Kelly** (*to the audience*) You have this image of us, don't you? We're dangerous criminals. If you came here you'd see what a load of crap that is.

Take Carmen, she's my current cellmate. Can't be more than six stone. Shivers all day like a whipped puppy. I mean, danger! She's just come back on wing, she was on suicide watch but they don't have any spaces left. I don't know. She worries *me* and I'm hardly a good role model. She thinks the women are going to scald her, so she won't go to the canteen. Not sure why. Someone thought she said something to a screw that got her moved away from her girlfriend. Carmen might have. She might not have.

She's only got another four months. In for shoplifting. Her useless bloody boyfriend went off with her benefits and she wanted some food for her kids. Now they're in care, and she doesn't even know where they are and she's terrified social are going to have them adopted while she's here. It's all she bloody talks about. When she talks. God knows what this bloody noise is doing to her. It's doing my fucking head in.

**Lindsay** You have to remember the only way they can express themselves sometimes is to ligature. To get attention, to deal with the problems that they've got.

**Kelly** It's pretty evil here on the wing right now. There hasn't been a drugs drop for several weeks. I'm having a hard time, too, but I can't get transferred off the wing. There's that group upstairs...a right crew. They've grabbed me stuff, me brews, me tobacco, and my arm really hurts because of the cutting. And there's the name calling ... slasher, no-hoper, failure. I've ligatured four times and I've cut myself I don't know how many... Sometimes it's a cry for help; sometimes I want to kill myself.

**Lindsay** Mostly, they don't want to die, they want help but, because of other instances, because someone else happens to be hanging or has ligatured at the same time, they may be overlooked. It just depends on luck sometimes, whether they're found in time. We can't watch them all one-to-one.

**Kelly** (*shouts*)                      Liza! Will you shut up! Put a fucking sock  
in it or I'll fucking do you!

**Lindsay** We can't watch them all one-to-one.

*Lindsay exits and Kelly goes into a cell and shuts the door. The sound gradually ceases. The audience moves to a row of cells within the corridor.*

*CELL 1*

*A closed cell letterbox slot: It is the room with dried blood which we saw in the initial audio of scrubbing at the beginning of the play. Audio of scrubbing as heard previously and voice of **JACKIE**, 40s, Manchester accent.*

**Jackie (V/O)** I think I've got it all. I hate it when it dries up.

*Sound of brush thrown into bucket.*

**Jackie (V/O)** Oh fuck. There's another patch under the basin.

*Sound of scrubbing.*

*CELL 2*

*Open cell which contains only a table. On the table are J-Cloths, a folded sheet, a towel, boot laces, a belt, a shirt, a t-shirt, two bottle tops, a plastic fork, a plastic knife, a margarine tub lid, and wire from a bra.*

*CELL 3*

*Closed cell. Inside two prisoners, JANE and LIZA, are weaving strings of blue cotton torn from J-Cloths into plaits and chatting in a relaxed manner.*

**Jane** Yeah, and they take away the obvious – trainer laces, belts... though you can try and hide them down the plughole of your sink.

**Liza** You can rip the sheets though.

**Jane** Not if you're on watch. They take the bloody sheets away. And your clothes. You just get this stiff gown thing. Fucking freezing at night without blankets. They don't give a shit. (*She puts the plait round her neck.*) There!

**Liza** Nice.

**Jane** I had a blue necklace once.

**Liza** Yeah?

**Jane** Yeah. Little blue beads. Sort of like glass.

**Liza** What happened to it?

**Jane** Dunno. You think that's strong enough?

**Liza** I'd do another couple of strings... You don't want it to break when you pull it.

#### *CELL 4*

*Cell with letterbox slots: A prisoner, **JULIE**, lies on the bed, hidden under a thin sheet. A sign outside says: Safe cell. The cell is bare apart from a bed with a plastic mattress covered with stiff material. There is a quilted duvet with no cover, under which Julie has burrowed. Two built-in shelves, empty except for a cardboard potty and a Bible. A CCTV camera, behind a protective screen, is mounted on the wall adjacent to the window and a red light shows that it is on. The following can be heard on an audio loop:*



**Julie (V/O)**

We call them the Big Brother cells. I hate them. It's freezing in here, you can't shut the window thing and they won't let you have a magazine or a radio. It's horrible, you're alone for hours with a camera watching you. All the time. When you piss and everything. Even when you're on your period. And you don't know who's watching. It could be any of the men. They don't care. All they care about is that they don't have to bother cutting you down again. How would you like being watched all the time? There's no privacy, nothing. Surely it's against human rights. You're being punished. I want to get back on the wing, but they won't have it because I can't promise I won't do it again.

I was put in hospital when I was fifteen. They diagnosed schizophrenia, borderline personality disorder, split personality. It kept changing, it's a nightmare. And I'm tired of fighting and I'm sick of taking tablets. I feel like a bleeding pin-cushion the number of injections they give me. Now they've put me on some antipsychotic drug again. We'll just try you on this, we'll just try you on that. (*sighs*) I feel like saying it's alright you telling me try this or that, why don't you try it and see how it makes you feel?

### *INSTALLATION 3*

*A cupboard. Inside is a sign on which is written:*

When they're in prison they're not causing any problems elsewhere, so they stay there. Like in a cupboard. *Member of an Independent Prison Monitoring Committee*

**INSTALLATION 4**

*The Pos station. In the corridor is a desk where the Pos have their office. On the board is a whiteboard with handover details. On it is written in different coloured felt tips:*

<b>Cell</b>	<b>Prisoner</b>	<b>Remarks</b>	<b>Observation</b>
23	M	Attacks other prisoners	30 mins
24	T	Assaults staff. Spits and bites when ligatures are removed	15 mins
25	P	High suicide risk. Will cut with whatever is available	on constant watch
26	J	Found knife in shower and gave to staff. Now fears she will be hurt by other prisoners	hourly
27	A	Bullied while on wing. Three ligatures already this week	six times a night
28	L	Very unpredictable. Can be violent. Throws her food at staff.	hourly

<b>Notes</b>	<b>Figures for the month (June)</b>	Incidents of self harm: hanging: 3 ligatures: 24 cutting: 75 wound aggravation: 2 noose making: 8 Total: 112
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*Thirteen down on last month!  
And no fatalities!*

*An alarm bell rings loudly. Lindsay and two other prison officers run down the corridor pushing the audience out of the way. They enter Kelly's cell and kick the tied piece of torn sheet into the corridor. Lindsay comes out and talks to Kelly inside.*

**Lindsay** I know you want to go back to your mates on the wing, but I can't trust you. You say you won't cut and then you do it anyway. *(She turns to audience.)* Back to your cells, ladies. All over. Nothing to see.

*The doors open and the audience leave the prison.*

Space Eleven

*A female prison **GOVERNOR** in her late 40s, smartly dressed is sitting in a wine bar with a glass of white wine.*

**Governor** Yes, the Home Office often turns down requests to interview governors. They don't like us talking to the media, so I'm not going to say who I am or anything about where I work. Cheers.

I came up to London yesterday. We've had a day of briefings. Budgets. Cost cutting. Management talk. We should build on positives and deal with negatives...you know the kind of thing. A load of crap. Improvement to staff and prisoner health by cutting smoking throughout the estate. 'The prison estate.' You know the term?

Personally, I think there are rather more important issues in my prison than the danger posed by tobacco. But there you are. That's what they want us to address right now.

*Enter **LORD RAMSBOTHAM**. He is at a conference and addresses the audience as if giving a talk.*

**Ramsbotham** My name is David Ramsbotham and I was Chief Inspector of Prisons from 1995 until 2001. Today our prison system is in crisis.

**Governor** You really want to hear what we think about our prison system? How about this for a start? Prison should be for criminals. Now wouldn't that be radical!

**Ramsbotham**                      They are the repository of our social problems, largely populated by people with drug addiction problems, mental health problems and learning problems.

**Governor**                      Jesus, Phil Wheatley, he's director of prisons, would kill me for saying this, but my prison – and it's the same in women's prisons all over the UK – is full of people who basically can't cope. You know, the bad, the mad and the sad. If we just had the bad, our numbers would go down from over four thousand to... let's say five hundred. That's not an exaggeration. The rest, the sad and the mad (not PC but let's skip that, shall we?) should be in detox units or mental health centres. Then we could actually turn round those five hundred.

**Ramsbotham**                      I went to Parkhurst once and asked the Governor what was the aim of his prison. He said: "Save five hundred thousand pounds of my budget by the end of the year".

**Governor**                      Rehabilitation means less reoffending. That's what I used to be told. Now we're so short staffed we can't do half the courses, education we ought to be doing. ...The women are lucky some days to have any time outside their cells. It's inevitable some of them will get worse because we can't provide the treatment they need, and in many cases, the environment exacerbates their condition. (*Beat*). Every morning, I wonder if today another woman is going to die.

**Ramsbotham**                      When things go wrong, people should be held to account, which is one of the reasons behind my insistence that the prison service should be included in the Corporate Manslaughter Bill.

**Ramsbotham Cont.**                    We had five ping-pongs with the House of Commons on this. Because I think it's quite outrageous that people should not be personally held responsible.

**Governor**                                You think I should be accountable? Me personally? I've heard that one. Put me and my staff up for manslaughter? Bring that in and you'll have an overnight walk-out. Charge me for manslaughter for failing to prevent a death? What about the thousands of times my staff save lives? If they ever charge a prison governor, there won't be a functioning jail left in the country. What good will it do to send me to jail for trying to do an impossible job? We're doing our best. Write that down!

Oh Christ, is that the time? Sorry. Must catch my train. I hope you do get somewhere with this because I'm sick to death of sending out recommendations that never get anywhere.

*Lord Ramsbotham and the Governor exit.*

*Space Four*

*Wakefield Coroner's Court (4)*

*Leslie and Pete and Kirsty and Prison Officers and Governor Arkle are in their places. ANDREW MARSDEN enters the witness box.*

**Marsden**

Andrew James Marsden

**Leslie**

You are a Senior Officer at New Hall?

**Marsden**

Yes, at the time of her death I'd been there three years.

**Leslie**

If you would like to tell the court...

*Lindsay steps out of court.*

**Lindsay**

This chap from the press asked him that a few years back. And Andy told him. The truth. Not what you'll hear in court. On his first night at New Hall, Andy said that he'd had to cut down six women. Andy/

**Marsden** *(steps out of court to join her)* /thought I'd died and gone to hell.

**Lindsay**

But then, like all of us he... what was the phrase he used... he grew accustomed to seeing women on the brink of death.

**Marsden**

There was one woman there; I only saw her when she was blue.

**Lindsay**                                      The Governor didn't like you saying that.

**Marsden**                                      No.

**Lindsay**                                      You didn't say how she'd bite when you took off her ligatures.

**Marsden**                                      That's the only time they really go for you, even Petra. Remember Molly? Jesus, she could kick! And she had a knack for getting the same place on my leg every time. I was black and blue.

**Lindsay**                                      Otherwise she was a sweet girl.

*Marsden returns to court. Lindsay sits with the other Pos.*

**Leslie**                                      How did you find Petra?

**Marsden**                                      At first she didn't want to speak to a male member of staff and all I saw was the top of her baseball cap. It took time to get to know her. Her mood fluctuated.

**Leslie**                                      In the catalogue of continual self-harm incidents, some of which required hospital treatment, you note: "I still don't understand where Petra is coming from and neither can she".

**Marsden**                                      Yes.

**Leslie**                                      Taking away her self-harm, she wasn't any trouble?



**Marsden** (shakes his head) She was a very likeable girl.

**Leslie** You spent quite a lot of time with Petra about the time her son was adopted.

**Marsden** She was unsure whether she'd made the right decision. The adoption was preying on her. It helped after she met the family and they were really nice people.

**Leslie** Do you think Petra ever came to terms with that decision?

**Marsden** I think it haunted her.

**Leslie** Thank you Mr Marsden.

*Marsden leaves the stand. Kirsty and Pete go outside for a cigarette.*

**Pete** I don't blame the prison officers. They're behind us because in one's guy's words, "we're pissed off with being dumped on". They've all said that Petra shouldn't have been in prison. Anybody with a brain cell could tell that. You could tell that some of them really cared.

**Kirsty** When Petra were in hospital, some of the prison officers used to come and visit her on their days off. Hold her hand, be there when my Dad and I went for a cup of tea.



**Walton** Yes, she'd join them in the evening and weekends.

**Leslie** She got on well with the other prisoners?

**Walton** It was more the other way. They were always asking about her. Sometimes she'd accept it, sometimes she didn't.

**Leslie** You liked her a lot.

**Walton** I did like her a lot.

**Leslie** Can I ask you a difficult question? Was it your feeling that in addition to the self-harming, that she also wanted to end her life?

**Walton** Petra once described to me an out-of-body experience, of drifting towards a bright light, she was floating, she was happy. The nightmare only began when she opened her eyes. She said: "Don't be sad for me, be sad for the people who have to cope". I found it a very sad thing for a nineteen-year-old ...

Petra once said if I'd have been her mother, she'd have had a happy childhood. She'd have given that happy childhood she'd never had to her son.

**Leslie** You've obviously seen a lot of vulnerable women within the prison. Where would you place Petra?

**Walton**                                      The very worst in terms of intention. It was always going to be a question of when she was going to take her life, not if.

**Leslie**                                      It was your stated belief that Petra was “a death in custody waiting to happen”?

**Walton**                                      Yes, sir.

**Leslie**                                      Death was an inevitable conclusion?

**Walton**                                      It was difficult to keep Petra safe without taking everything off her.

**Leslie**                                      Let me suggest that she would be less at risk in a safe cell.

**Walton**                                      Safe cells aren't always the answer. They're regarded as a punishment. Taking away their clothes... making them wear paper knickers...

*Enter Lord Ramsbotham. He talks directly to the audience.*

**Ramsbotham**                              The problem of safe cells is one I recognize very well. Prisons face difficult choices – essentially between our two tests of dignity and safety. You can, of course, physically prevent someone from committing suicide by putting them in straitjackets. We rarely resort to that; but we do put people, even children, in stark, sometimes dungeon- like, unfurnished cells, stripped of their normal clothing, watched (but not engaged with) in every movement they make.

**Ramsbotham cont.** I understand why that happens, in establishments that know they are likely to be blamed for any failures – but it is not ‘care’, it is ‘containment’; it does not solve the underlying causes of distress, but merely postpones their emergence – ‘not on my watch, please’.

**Walton** These are temporary measures. One endeavours to return to normality as soon as possible because if this was continued it would be very detrimental.

**Leslie** Surely the right to life trumps all other rights?

**Walton** But it must be proportionate.

**Ramsbotham** Safety is the first, and a fundamental test, and is reinforced by the positive duty to protect life in Article 2 of the European Court of Human Rights.

**Walton** You do whatever you can to keep them safe. That’s all you can do.

*Walton returns to her seat and she is replaced by Prison Officer **CRAIG WOOF**, twenties, shy. This is clearly difficult for him.*

**Leslie** Mr Woof, we’re now finally coming to the morning of 19<sup>th</sup> November 2003. You were a probationary officer at the time. And you were on duty on the wing of F2. You and Mr Rhodes were starting to unlock the cells for lunch...

**Woof** Mr Rhodes shouted “Woofy!” and I started to remove my safety knife as I ran because I knew the room he’d gone into was Petra’s.

**Leslie** You weren’t surprised by what you saw?

**Woof** I started to cut the ligatures. There were two strips of pick material the same as the bedding. I think it was from the bottom sheet, where the hems been sewn over. There was one strand tied round then wrapped round again. I tried to get my knife into it, freed a loose bit, got it off...

**Leslie** I’m sorry. I know you found it distressing.

*Woof takes a tissue. Pete is comforting Kirsty.*

**Leslie** You said before that when you went into the room you weren’t surprised because this wasn’t the first time.

**Woof** No.

**Leslie** Petra was not the only young woman on the wing who was self harming. You were involved with a number of women employing a variety of different methods...swallowing, burning, ligatures ... my imagination runs cold ... there were others?

**Woof** Yes, sir.

**Leslie** You had no first aid training prior to the incident. I’m not criticising you. Were you happy with the training you got?

**Woof** On first aid. No, sir.

**Leslie** That's very honest of you. At the time of this incident, no-one saw it fit to provide you with any training in first aid?

**Woof** I think we did ten to fifteen minutes in induction on putting somebody into the recovery position.

**Leslie** You liked Petra didn't you? You were someone she trusted, she confided in...

*Woof nods.*

**Leslie** What time did you start working that day?

**Woof** Seven thirty.

**Leslie** Were you told that morning about Petra? She had previously threatened to take all her antibiotics and then carried out that threat. Your colleague, Mr Rhodes has testified that he'd taken her to the nurse. Did anyone suggest to you that she was particularly at risk?

**Woof** I'd seen Mr Rhodes take her to the nurse. I knew she wasn't feeling herself.

**Leslie** Were you given any special instructions that morning?

**Woof** Mr Rhodes said she were low and keep an eye on her.

**Leslie** You tried to keep an eye on her. Open the flap and check. This is standard prison procedure. If there's someone in the room, the door is closed? You'd have checked through the flap?

**Woof** Personally I preferred to open the door and sit and talk with her.

**Leslie** But you had many other duties that morning and Petra was not on constant observation.

**Woof** It's always a balance. Constant observation could make her worse.

**Leslie** I am going to suggest that her measure of risk demanded a change of surveillance more extreme that "keep an eye on her" which is what Mr Rhodes said to you.

**Woof** Petra had said she felt better and wanted to return to education. But she was always a high risk.

*Lindsay comes out of the court. Leslie and Pete and Kirsty come forward.*

**Lindsay** It's not a question of observation. It's getting them to stop self-harming. For some of them it's almost every day. I cut away one ligature, and I'm hardly down the stairs before they've tied another. There's always something new. For some of them it's like a comfort blanket.



**Lindsay cont.** The latest thing is J-Cloths, they've worked out that if they twist one round their necks at night, it'll dry out and strangle them in their sleep. They'll wear it all day like a band round their neck. It's just a provocation. I don't know what it is we're supposed to do about it.

*Enter Pauline.*

**Pauline** Before my daughter's death, I had no idea of the appalling state of women's prisons. It's medieval. And I will speak out. There's no time limit on this work that I'm doing. As long as women continue to die whilst in the so-called care of Her Majesty's Prison Service, then there is a job for me to do and I intend to carry on doing it.

*Pauline exits.*

**Pete** Pauline couldn't deal with her loss. She was so alone.

**Leslie** On 15 May 2008, Pauline was found dead not far from the grave of her daughter Sarah.

**Kirsty** I still hear her voice as she used to say, shame on them, Kirsty.

**Pete** That's what she used to say. Shame on them!

**Kirsty** That's why it can't stop. As a society we're all failing each other, otherwise we'd all do something. I'm determined to do something.

**Kirsty cont**

For Petra. For Pauline. For all those  
who've died. For ...

*The rest of the cast enters and in turn read the names of those who have died of self-inflicted injuries( or negligence) in prison. They take taper candles and light them in front of a list on which the names are displayed. Then, as the reading continues, they invite the audience to step forward and light a candle if they wish.*

*List: (this should be kept updated)*

<b>Sharon Wilkinson</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>Styal</b>
<b>Edeita Pomell</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>Brockhill</b>
<b>Sandra Harris</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>Brockhill</b>
<b>Sheena Creamer</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>New Hall</b>
<b>Anne Marie Bates</b>	<b>2001</b>	<b>Brockhill</b>
<b>Donna Borg</b>	<b>2001</b>	<b>Styal</b>
<b>Victoria Winterburn</b>	<b>2002</b>	<b>New Hall</b>
<b>Nissa Ann Smith</b>	<b>2002</b>	<b>Styal</b>
<b>Miranda Cox</b>	<b>2002</b>	<b>New Hall</b>
<b>Jacqueline McPartline</b>	<b>2002</b>	<b>New Hall</b>
<b>Anna Baker</b>	<b>2002</b>	<b>Styal</b>
<b>Beverly Fowler</b>	<b>2002</b>	<b>Durham</b>
<b>Diana Schooling</b>	<b>2002</b>	<b>Durham</b>
<b>Helena Price</b>	<b>2003</b>	<b>New Hall</b>
<b>Jessica Adam</b>	<b>2003</b>	<b>New Hall</b>
<b>Sarah Campbell</b>	<b>2003</b>	<b>Styal</b>
<b>Jolene Willis</b>	<b>2003</b>	<b>Styal</b>
<b>Hayley Williams</b>	<b>2003</b>	<b>Styal</b>
<b>Jennifer Clifford</b>	<b>2003</b>	<b>Bullwood Hall</b>
<b>Clare Parsons</b>	<b>2003</b>	<b>Eastwood Park</b>

<b>Jayne Buck</b>	<b>2003</b>	<b>Durham</b>
<b>Petra Blanksby</b>	<b>2003</b>	<b>New Hall</b>
<b>Judith McGlinchey</b>	<b>2003</b>	<b>New Hall</b>
<b>Sue Stevens</b>	<b>2003</b>	<b>Durham</b>
<b>Julie Walsh</b>	<b>2003</b>	<b>Styal</b>
<b>Leanne Gidney</b>	<b>2003</b>	<b>Brockhill</b>
<b>Wendy Booth</b>	<b>2003</b>	<b>Durham</b>
<b>Emma Levey</b>	<b>2003</b>	<b>Downview</b>
<b>Sharon Miller</b>	<b>2004</b>	<b>Durham</b>
<b>Katherine Jones</b>	<b>2004</b>	<b>Brockhill</b>
<b>Tina Bromley</b>	<b>2004</b>	<b>Highpoint</b>
<b>April Sherman</b>	<b>2004</b>	<b>Highpoint</b>
<b>Sheena Kotecha</b>	<b>2004</b>	<b>Brockhill</b>
<b>Rebecca Smith</b>	<b>2004</b>	<b>Buckley Hall</b>
<b>Heather Waite</b>	<b>2004</b>	<b>Holloway</b>
<b>Paige Tapp</b>	<b>2004</b>	<b>Send</b>
<b>Louise Davies</b>	<b>2004</b>	<b>New Hall</b>
<b>Julie Hope</b>	<b>2004</b>	<b>Holloway</b>
<b>Marie Walsh</b>	<b>2004</b>	<b>New Hall</b>
<b>Rebecca Turner</b>	<b>2004</b>	<b>Low Newton</b>
<b>Mandy Pearson</b>	<b>2004</b>	<b>New Hall</b>
<b>Louise Giles</b>	<b>2005</b>	<b>Durham</b>
<b>Victoria Robinson</b>	<b>2005</b>	<b>New Hall</b>
<b>Lyndsey Wright</b>	<b>2005</b>	<b>Holloway</b>
<b>Lisa Anne Woodhall</b>	<b>2006</b>	<b>Eastwood Park</b>
<b>Valerie Hayes</b>	<b>2006</b>	<b>Styal</b>
<b>Kelly Hutchinson</b>	<b>2006</b>	<b>New Hall</b>
<b>Kerry Devereux</b>	<b>2007</b>	<b>Foston Hall</b>
<b>Emma Kelly</b>	<b>2007</b>	<b>Send</b>
<b>Marie Cox</b>	<b>2007</b>	<b>Holloway</b>
<b>Lisa Doe</b>	<b>2007</b>	<b>Send</b>

<b>Caroline Powell</b>	<b>2007</b>	<b>Eastwood Park</b>
<b>Lucy Wood</b>	<b>2007</b>	<b>Peterborough</b>
<b>Helen Cole</b>	<b>2007</b>	<b>Styal</b>
<b>Jamie Pearce</b>	<b>2007</b>	<b>Holloway</b>
<b>Lisa Marley</b>	<b>2008</b>	<b>Styal</b>
<b>Alison Colk</b>	<b>2009</b>	<b>Styal</b>

*The candles continue to burn as the cast exit.*

*End*

This play was written from the following sources:

- Personal transcription of the inquest into the death of Petra Blanksby, Wakefield Coroner's Court, with the kind permission of Her Majesty's Coroner for West Yorkshire, David Hinchliff, January 14 to February 1, 2008
- Interview with Kirsty Blanksby, 2008
- Interviews with Pete Blanksby 2007 and 2008
- Notebook of Petra Blanksby transcribed with permission of Pete Blanksby
- Interviews with Pauline Campbell, 2007 and 2008
- Conversations with Leslie Thomas, 2008
- Interview with Lord Ramsbotham, 2008
- Interview with Dr Duncan Double, 2007
- Interview with Brian Caton, General Secretary of the Prison Officers Association, 2006
- Interviews with unnamed prison governors, officers, psychiatrists, psychologists and a junior doctor, 2006 - 2008
- Interview with "S", former prison inmate, 2008
- Informal conversation with prison officers at the inquest into the death of Petra Blanksby. 2008
- Transcript of Committal Proceedings. Regina v Rebecca Gidney, Norwich Crown Court, Judge Peter Jacobs, July, 2005
- Personal transcript of Pauline Campbell at demonstration by Pauline Campbell, 18/10/2006 at Eastwood Park 2006 following the death in Eastwood Park of Lisa Ann Woodhall
- BBC Documentary, Women On The Edge: The Truth About Styal Prison, produced and directed by Rachel Coughlan, broadcast on BBC 2 on 27 February 2006.
- Bright, Martin (2004) "Women burn, strangle and stab themselves in jail hell" *Observer*, February 8, 2004,

Coles, D., and Sandler, M. *Dying on the Inside*, London: Inquest, 2008

Lyon, Juliet article in *Guardian*, 14 March 2007, published by The  
Prison Reform Trust, 2008,

Scruton, P and Moore, L. (2007) *The prison within: The imprisonment  
of women at Hydebank Wood 2004-06* Belfast: Northern  
Ireland Human Rights Commission

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Henderson Hospital websites

websites of several former asylums

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Baroness Corston, *The Corston Report*, 2007

Speech by Bob Russell MP delivered to Adjournment Debate, 7 July  
2000

House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, 8 November 2005

House of Lords debate on Women in Prison, 24 October, 2002

House of Lords debate on Deaths in Custody, 9 June 2005

House of Lords debate on Prison Suicides, 20 October, 2005

House of Lords debate on Healthcare, 10 November, 2005

House of Lords debate on a Royal Commission for prisons, 26 June,  
2008

## Text 1 Pauline's photocopies

**Figures suggest the number of inmate suicides this year will exceed last year's total of 67. A mother whose daughter died of an overdose in jail believes many of them could have been prevented.**

Retired teacher Pauline Campbell keeps a record of the six women who have killed themselves in prison this year.

The first, she says, was a 26-year-old mother-of-five. She was found hanging in her cell at a prison in Gloucestershire on 5 January.

She had yet to be convicted for her "non-violent" crime and Mrs Campbell believes she should never have been in prison.

Mrs Campbell is a tireless, one-woman campaigner.

She never wanted the role but felt she owed it to her daughter Sarah, who died after taking an overdose of anti-depressants at Styal Prison, in Cheshire, in January 2003.

She said her daughter, who had been given three years for manslaughter a day earlier, received "appalling" care.

### **Mental Illness**

Mrs Campbell said her 18-year-old daughter had a mental illness and was at the start of her sentence - two of the categories said to place prisoners most at risk of self-harm and suicide.

The teenager had a history of heroin addiction and self-harm, and her mother believes she should have been placed in a psychiatric hospital.



Pauline Campbell highlights another death in prison

Text 2: texts for The Mental Health Maze

### Number 1

From The British Journal of Psychiatry, February 2002, Volume 180, p 115, article by Robert Kendell with the following quote circled

*It is commonplace for a diagnosis of personality disorder to be used to justify a decision not to admit someone to a psychiatric ward, or even to accept them for treatment – a practice that understandably puzzles and irritates that staff of accident and emergency departments, general practitioners and probation officers, who can find themselves left to cope as best they can with extremely difficult, frustrating people without any psychiatric assistance*

### Number 2

*Diagnostic criteria for borderline **personality disorder***

- *Frantic efforts to avoid real or imagined abandonment and chronic feeling of emptiness*
- *Unstable sense of self*
- *Unstable and intense relationships*
- *Impulsivity and recurrent self harm*
- *Affective instability and inappropriate or intense anger and difficulty dealing with it*



**Number 3**Mental Health Act, 1983.

*The Act recognizes four categories of mental disorder:*

- 1. Mental Illness*
- 2. Mental Impairment*
- 3. Severe Mental Impairment*
- 4. Psychopathic Disorder*

*Personality disorders are not specifically defined under the current Mental Health Act although they are commonly implicated within the diagnosis of psychopathic disorder. Clinicians define and describe them in a number of different ways.*

**Number 4**World Health Organisation International Classification of Diseases, 1992

*Personality disorders can be defined as: ingrained, maladaptive patterns of cognition and behaviour; recognisable in adolescence or earlier; continuing throughout most of adult life, although becoming less obvious in middle or old age.*

## Number 5

### Joint Committee on the Draft Mental Bill

*We know from the research, that about 87% of people using mental health services, have experienced some form of trauma or a substantial period of stress. Mainstream services often fail to address this factor. Whereas, from what we know, “mental illness” is often better understood as a side effect of trauma, stress, or a predisposition to a set of symptoms, under particular circumstances. Research into psycho-neuro-immunology has shown that the circumstances within which treatment/support are given can account for up to 70% of the benefits of the treatment. The emphasis of the Bill, with its concern for compulsory detention and treatment, maintains the victim status for people with a medical diagnosis, rather than giving them the right to the treatment, support and hope, that recognises, and listens to, the circumstances that gave rise to their distress and their aspirations for a hopeful future.*

## Number 6

Richard Brook, Mind

*Over the last seven years, we have seen a Green Paper, a White Paper and two draft Bills, that each time we have hoped will provide the necessary legislation to deliver a workable mental health system delivering effective and compassionate mental healthcare. Yet sadly the Government has still not fully listened to the advice of the mental health stakeholders across the board.*

## Number 7

This paper is stained with rings from a coffee mug:

***Hello, and welcome to the mental health hotline.***

*If you are obsessive-compulsive, press 1 repeatedly.*

*If you are co-dependent, please ask someone to press 2 for you.*

*If you have multiple personalities, press 3, 4, 5, and 6.*

*If you are paranoid, we know who you are and what you want. Stay on the line so we can trace your call.*

*If you are delusional, press 7 and your call will be transferred to the mother ship.*

*If you are a manic-depressive, it doesn't matter which number you press, no one will answer.*

*If you have short-term memory loss, press 9. If you have short-term memory loss, press 9.*

*If you have short-term memory loss, press 9. If you have short-term memory loss, press 9.*

*If you have low self-esteem, please hang up. All operators are too busy to talk to you.*

## Number 8

*Notes for next Wednesday's talk:*

*I think the problem is one of perception. Psychiatrists traditionally have statutory responsibility for the health and safety of the severely mentally ill, i.e. the most vulnerable group in our society. But they also have a responsibility to protect the safety of others in the unusual situation of a mentally ill person presenting a risk to a member of the public when acutely unwell. They therefore have traditionally been the gatekeepers with regard to compulsory admission to hospital for further assessment or treatment. It's juggling those two roles that can create problems. I've seen colleagues off duty staying at patients' bedsides half the night just to be supportive. How have we allowed ourselves to be in a position where psychiatrists are viewed as the enemy?*

**Number 9**

From The Mental Health Foundation

*Treatability refers to two main issues, amenability and suitability. Amenability refers to the individual's readiness and willingness to engage in a programme of change. People with personality disorder often do not recognise the need for personal change. Therefore, establishing engagement needs to be part of the programme.*

*Suitability refers to the programme of treatment on offer to the individual. It is generally stated that personality disorders does not respond to treatment. However, there are several promising methods although resources are generally in short supply. All too often the patient is blamed for not fitting the programme rather than the service admitting that it has not met the individual's needs*

Text 3 *Text for Mental Health Installation Five*

*This should be written across a wall with no gaps.*

Good morning. Thank you very much indeed for coming this morning to give evidence to us. As you know, this is a one-off hearing into the issue of prison suicides and their causes. Good morning. Thank you very much indeed for coming here this morning to give evidence on the very serious problem of overcrowding in prisons. Good morning. Thank you very much indeed for coming this morning to discuss the issue of how the care in the community programme has allowed the Government to use crime to deal with mental illness. Good morning. Thank you very much indeed for coming this morning to give evidence to us. As you know, this is a six month consultation on mental health in custody. Good morning. Thank you very much indeed for coming this morning to give evidence to us for our third report on women's prisons and the appallingly high levels of self-harm and suicide. Good morning. Thank you very much indeed for coming this morning to give evidence to us. As you know, this is a week-long hearing to examine the factors affecting the mental health of women in custody. Good morning. Thank you very much indeed for coming this morning to give evidence to us. As you know, this is a nine month consultation on the issues affecting women in prison. Good morning. Thank you very much indeed. Good morning. Thank you very much indeed for coming to give evidence for the committee on Human Rights abuses. Good morning. Thank you very much indeed for coming this morning to give evidence to us. As you know, this is a one-off hearing into suicide prevention. Good morning. Thank you very much indeed for coming this morning to give evidence to us. As you know, this is a two-year fact-finding study on mental health issues. Good morning. Thank you very much indeed for coming this morning to give evidence to us. As you know, this is a one-year consultation exercise regarding the mental in prisons. Good morning. Thank you very much indeed for coming this morning to give evidence to us to assist our response in a pre-legislative scrutiny of the draft Mental Health Bill. Good morning. Can I welcome colleagues to this session of the Committee on Care Standards and particularly welcome our witnesses and thank them for their participation. Good morning. Thank you very much indeed for coming this morning to give evidence to us. As you know, this is a one-off hearing into the issue of prison suicides and their causes. Good morning. Thank you very much indeed for coming here this morning to give evidence on the very serious problem of overcrowding in prisons. Good morning. Thank you very much indeed for coming this morning to discuss the issue of how the care in the community programme has allowed the Government to use crime to deal with mental illness. Good morning. Thank you very much indeed for coming this morning to give evidence to us. As you know, this is a six month consultation on mental

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# Constructing the Real: An Examination of Authorship and Ownership in Contemporary Verbatim Theatre

Critical component



## 1

## Verbatim Theatre – a Theatre for our Times?

*The predominance and resilience of verbatim, witness and testimony theatre needs explaining.*

– David Edgar, 2008:18

The four years during which I wrote *Cuts* and *Trash* (2005-2009), witnessed a change in verbatim theatre from being a rare theatrical event attracting attention because of its novelty to its becoming a widely accepted genre of (mostly) political theatre. Paul Taylor's review in the *Independent* of Robin Soans's play, *Talking to Terrorists* (2005), for example, notes that the play is "entirely composed of interwoven testimonies" (2005), a description that I suggest would be unnecessary today when so many verbatim plays are structured in this way. Verbatim theatre, indeed, became a major feature of theatrical practice in Britain in the first decade of the twenty-first century and, as Susannah Clapp, in her overview of the decade, notes: "gave political drama new authority" (2009).

During this decade, a large number of productions of verbatim plays took place on stages throughout Britain. These include David Hare's *The Permanent Way* (2003) and *Stuff Happens* (2004) at the National Theatre, *Guantanamo: Honor Bound to Defend Freedom* by Victoria Brittain and Gillian Slovo (2004) at the Tricycle Theatre and in London's West End,<sup>3</sup> Tanika Gupta's *Gladiator Games* (2003) at Stratford East, the Tribunal

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<sup>3</sup> In the published version of the play, in the play programme and on the Tricycle website, the prison/town is written as 'Guantanamo' without the accent, although some critics, referring to the play, write 'Guantánamo'. In this study I have followed the version of the playwrights. I also follow common practice, and, after this initial reference, use the shortened version of the title: *Guantanamo*.

plays edited by Richard Norton-Taylor and directed by Nicolas Kent at the Tricycle, *Cruising* (2006) by Alecky Blythe at the Bush, and Philip Ralph's *Deep Cut* (2008) which opened at the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh before touring Wales and England. Over the past ten years, verbatim plays have been performed in a converted brewery (*Fallujah*, Jonathan Holmes, 2007), village and school halls and university junior common rooms (*Asylum Monologues* and *Asylum Dialogues*, Sonja Linden, 2006 and 2007) and prisons, hospitals and small community centres.

The genre also became popular in Australia, the United States and Canada. Several plays such as Doug Wright's *I Am My Own Wife* (2003), *The Exonerated* (2002) by Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen, and *Stuff Happens* played on and off Broadway before touring other cities, and *The Exonerated* and *The Laramie Project* (2000), by Moisés Kaufman, became two of the most-produced plays in colleges across America.

The prominence and popularity of verbatim theatre prompt a number of questions regarding the form, history and aims of the genre. This chapter will examine the contemporary practice of verbatim theatre in relation to previous manifestations of documentary theatre. It will ask what is understood by the label 'verbatim' and how the genre developed, and will examine some of the reasons for its recent popularity.

## 1.1 Verbatim Theatre: An Intermittent Tradition

*A writer needs to reinvent the theatre every time he or she writes a play.*

– John McGrath, 2002:239

When, in July 2006, in the closing plenary panel of a symposium<sup>4</sup> on “Verbatim Practices in Contemporary Theatre”, Carol Martin described the varied theatrical practices discussed over the previous two days as “what you in Britain call verbatim theatre and what we in the USA call documentary theatre”, she was acknowledging a label that has increasingly been employed in this country for a variety of factually-based contemporary theatrical productions. Andrew Lavender, one of the convenors of the symposium, identified the reason for the two-day gathering as the emergence, over the past ten years of a new genre, “a set of practices and productions that have been described as ‘verbatim theatre’”.<sup>5</sup> These two statements raise many questions regarding this new genre and, as a playwright, the one that I have to address is: Why choose to write plays based on other people’s words, and not a fictional account of a theme or event? However, before I can address this question I also need to unpick two other questions: What forms of theatrical practice and production are contained within the label ‘verbatim theatre’? What are its origins?

The term ‘verbatim theatre’ was first defined by Derek Paget in his 1987 article, “Verbatim Theatre: Oral History and Documentary Techniques”. Paget sets out the boundaries, as he sees them, of verbatim theatre as “a

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<sup>4</sup> This and further citations from the two-day symposium at the Central School of Speech and Drama, London 13-14 July 2006, convened by David Annen, Andy Lavender and Dan Milne, are from notes taken at the symposium.

<sup>5</sup> Verbatim Symposium advance publicity, 26 May 2006.

form of theatre firmly predicated upon the taping and subsequent transcription of interviews with ‘ordinary’ people done in the context of research into a particular region, subject area, issue, event, or combination of these things.” These transcripts are then “transformed into a text which is acted, usually by the performers who collected the material in the first place” (1987:317). Paget’s article describes a type of theatre which was first established by Peter Cheeseman at the Victoria Theatre in Stoke-on-Trent in the 1960s and 1970s. The emphasis in the article is on the methodology of the genre: these are plays which are created because technology allows an exact transcription of oral testimony. The term ‘verbatim’ is emphasised because the plays pride themselves on including only primary source material. Indeed, in his introduction to *The Knotty*, (1966) one of his most successful verbatim plays, Cheeseman notes that the techniques of recording and using only the words of those providing testimony are what distinguishes these plays from other forms of theatre (1970:xiii).

Verbatim as an alternative term for documentary clearly does not have the same meaning as when used here by Paget to describe a specific technique of recording and reproducing actual speech in the creation of a play. To trace the journey from Paget’s definition to the widespread use of the term today is to uncover the development of a genre. However, one of the problems in describing this journey is that it can lead to a morass of definitions. Different commentators employ the term verbatim theatre to cover different aspects of factually-based theatre. Paget, for example, more recently, differentiates between verbatim plays and tribunal plays (2009:233-234), while Alison Jeffers uses the terms documentary theatre to describe plays that are sourced from existing documents, and verbatim theatre to cover “the specific technique whereby the exact, albeit edited, words of the subjects are inserted into the play” (2009:90-92). Mary Luckhurst, on the other hand, includes both tribunal plays and plays that

are hybrids of fact and fiction in her list of recent verbatim plays (2008:200). The latter include Tanika Gupta's *Gladiator Games*, Gregory Burke's play *Black Watch* (2006) and *Frost/Nixon* (Peter Morgan, 2006). The fact that *Black Watch* and *Frost/Nixon* are fictional, though based on factual events, is acknowledged in interviews by their creators. Peter Morgan has called *Frost/Nixon* "just another fiction" (Bryan Appleyard, 2006), and, the director of *Black Watch*, John Tiffany, notes in an interview why the play is not in his view verbatim, emphasising his belief that this would require complete fidelity to the primary source material. The quotation is also interesting as a statement of the concern that adherence to the literal words of original sources may lead to plays that are not theatrically stimulating:

The most faithful route of all might have been verbatim theatre in which every word on stage would have been taken from the interviews, but Tiffany decided against that. 'We certainly set out,' says Tiffany, 'to capture the real stories and the texture of what those lads told us, but my take on verbatim is that just because it's real doesn't make it dramatic. You've got a responsibility to shape it into something more entertaining. And we wanted the freedom to create our own characters so that the people who spoke to us didn't have to take responsibility for what we were saying.' (Jane Edwardes, 2008)

The use of the label is clearly flexible and varied. Different writers currently employ different labels for the same plays, which is no doubt why Alison Forsyth and Chris Megson, in their introduction to *Get Real, Documentary Theatre Past and Present*, acknowledge that each writer has chosen and defined his/her own terms to describe the genre (2009:2). In order to avoid this confusion, I have followed Martin's dictum and use

the term ‘verbatim theatre’ throughout this thesis to cover all types of fact-based theatre created from first-hand testimony, spoken or written.<sup>6</sup>

### 1.1.1 Verbatim practices to 1940

In the light of the long tradition of historically-based drama, it hardly needs saying that there is nothing new in plays based on factual material. Yet within the tradition, the convention is for the present to be explored through the lens of past events. Dawson cites Georg Büchner’s *Danton’s Death* (1835), as the earliest example of a play drawn from documentary evidence (1999:2-3), but while one-fifth of the text does consist of “direct, often verbatim quotations from historical accounts of the Revolution of 1789” (Gerhard Knapp, 2003), the play is a combination of the documented and the invented. Nevertheless, its structure anticipates contemporary verbatim theatrical practice in that, as Knapp notes, the play “creates a totally novel aesthetic form: the montage of documented historical facts with a fictional text.”

There are earlier examples of factually-based plays. Predating Büchner by more than two hundred years is *The Witch of Edmonton* (1621), by Thomas Dekker, John Ford and William Rowley. This play is based on transcripts of a contemporary witchcraft trial, and within its dual plot and subplots, it examines societal values through the words of the alleged witch, Elizabeth Sawyer. However, it is in the twentieth century, alongside the development of documentary film, that one finds plays which employ testimonial and documentary evidence to explore contemporary events and the lives of living people. A history of fact-based theatre, devised from contemporary documentary and testimonial material, has yet to be written, and is outside the realm of this study; yet it is not a genre that has been recently invented, as some commentators, including Dawson himself, suggest (1999:169).

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<sup>6</sup> However, when quoting writers who use the term ‘documentary’ to cover the same factually-based theatre plays and practices, I have not changed this.

Within the twentieth century there are three periods when the genre of factually-based theatre flourished (the 1930s, the 1960s/1970s and the 1990s), and all were also periods that saw the rise of political theatre. When David Edgar writes, “I think that the theatre of fact, the documentary theatre, was created to give credibility to the playwright’s analysis of the incredible happenings of our time,” (1988:53) he could as easily be writing about the 1930s and the establishment in the United States of the Federal Theatre Project as about the late twentieth century. The period between the two world wars was unique in terms of the development of political theatre; there has been no other time when so many writers and political activists turned to the theatre as a means of communication and a forum for ideas and issues to be aired. It is therefore unsurprising that theatre which partly, or wholly, included material based on fact flourished during this period.

The most notable venture of the Federal Theatre Project was the Living Newspaper, a form of theatre which originated in the Soviet Union. Living Newspapers used documentary material to create propagandist plays. In the words of Hallie Flanagan, National Director of the Federal Theatre Project, they dramatised “a new struggle – the search of the average American today for knowledge about his country and his world” (cited by Stuart Cosgrove, 1986:238). These plays, which were mostly written by Arthur Arendt, included *Triple-A Plowed Under* (1936), about a Supreme Court decision which had adversely affected farmers, *Power* (1937), about the injustices caused by electrical monopolies, and *One-Third of a Nation* (1938), about the lack of available housing for the poor.<sup>7</sup>

In Britain, the concept of dramatised Living Newspapers was swiftly adopted by the Workers’ Theatre company, Unity Theatre, whose

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<sup>7</sup> For a detailed study of the development of the Living Newspaper movement, see Cosgrove, 1982.

purpose, as Chambers notes, was to develop drama which “by effectively and truthfully interpreting life as experienced by the majority of the people, can move the people to the betterment of society” (2009:39). However, the most influential<sup>8</sup> British production of the form of the Living Newspaper was created outside the Unity Theatre by Theatre Union. This was produced by Jimmie Miller (later known as Ewan MacColl) and Joan Littlewood, entitled *Last Edition: A Living Newspaper Dealing with Events from 1934-1940* (1940).<sup>9</sup> The play included a montage of newspaper reportage, radio voice-over, songs, choreographed movement and a verbatim report on the Gresford pit disaster, where two hundred and sixty-five pit workers were killed (Harker, 2009:27-28). These plays were regarded by the Left as an alternative source of record, and one which offered a more reliable version of political commentary than that provided by the media of the day.

These plays did not, however, attempt to create a naturalistic re-enactment of an event. In *Last Edition*, the disaster formed a part of the play: it was not the play itself. The Living Newspapers drew on traditions of the music hall and on the theatre of Piscator and Brecht for their form, which was that of a political entertainment. In this they differ from the realist presentations of contemporary fact-based plays. While the plays of the 30s employ some verbatim material, there are two key areas of differentiation between them and contemporary examples. The first dissimilarity is that of presentation: contemporary verbatim productions tend towards a naturalistic representation of testimony, even to the extent, on occasion, of being forms of rehearsed readings; they do not try to entertain. The second difference is that of intention: in the 1930s, the Living Newspapers were employed to demonstrate political ideologies

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<sup>8</sup> Elements of its style can be seen in *Oh What a Lovely War!* (1963).

<sup>9</sup> An examination of the background politics of *Last Edition* can be found in Ben Harker’s study of the play, (2009:24 -37).



rather than simply re-enact or narrate specific events employing the words of witnesses. Events, such as the Gresford disaster, featured in the plays, but these events were presented as examples of a failing political system. The plays were explicitly didactic; factual material within the plays was viewed as “one ‘weapon’ in the revolutionaries’ theatrical arsenal” (Paget, 2009:224). Society, in the widest sense, was a target, whereas contemporary verbatim plays focus on specific issues within society, and there is little sense that the plays (or the playwrights) wish to overthrow the existing political system.

At its height, the Unity Theatre movement included two hundred and fifty theatre groups which were loosely linked in the Left Book Club Theatre Guild.<sup>10</sup> Of these, there were two professional companies (in London and Glasgow). They existed to form an alternative radical voice to the plays that were permitted by the censorship of the Lord Chamberlain, and it was only in the 1960s with the abolition of his office and the spread of fringe and touring theatre groups, that these companies began to die out. The end of the Living Newspapers, however, came about with the final tour of the appropriately-titled *Last Edition*, which toured England at the beginning of the Second World War until June, 1940, when police closed the production down and Jimmie Miller and Joan Littlewood were arrested (Harker, 2009:36)<sup>11</sup>. It was not until the 1960s that a new wave of verbatim plays emerged on the British stage.

### 1.1.2 Verbatim Practices 1960 - 1990

The second manifestation of factually-based theatre began in the 1960s and 1970s, and it developed in a number of separate, unrelated spheres. One of most influential was the BBC Radio Ballads of Ewan MacColl and Charles Parker (1958-1964). Today, when we expect to hear

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<sup>10</sup> The Liverpool Unity Theatre still operates. For a history of the theatre company see: <http://www.unitytheatreliverpool.co.uk/information/unity-history.html> . Accessed 10 February 2010.

<sup>11</sup> They were found guilty of giving an unlicensed public performance.

authentic voices from every medium, it is easy to forget how much radio played a part in making such voices acceptable. Indeed, Colin MacCabe asserts that “the introduction of recorded speech as a massive part of our linguistic environment marks a change in our culture which may come to seem as momentous as printing” (1999:47). The debt that verbatim theatre owes to these radio histories should not be underestimated.

It was Parker who himself made the step to take these histories from radio to stage in *The Maker and the Tool* (1962), a work which significantly influenced Cheeseman, when he began to employ the techniques of oral history to create plays such as *The Knotty* about the North Staffordshire Railway, and *Six into One* (1968), about the creation of Stoke from six small towns. *The Maker and the Tool* was a play that, as Watt notes, “pioneered techniques which emerged in the community-based theatre work which followed it” (2003:46). Cheeseman’s plays are examples of ‘communal theatre’, to use the phrase coined by Philip Auslander to describe a form of theatre that “brings its spectators into emotional harmony with one another by celebrating their common identity as human beings” (1997:13). This form of communal theatre conforms to Paget’s original definition of verbatim theatre, that of works that are created through taped interviews and: “*fed back*<sup>12</sup> into the communities (which have, in a real sense, created them), via a performance *in* those communities” (1987:317). Communal theatre has subsequently been widely developed in the UK in Theatre in Education, and around the world in therapeutic contexts: in hospitals and prisons and community centres and in centres for the elderly.

These communal plays adhere to the precise words of those who are interviewed and whose lives become the subject of the plays because

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<sup>12</sup> Paget’s emphasis.

they follow the tradition of oral history.<sup>13</sup> This celebrates communities and the individuals who make up those communities, and by recording people's memories and experiences, what the British Oral History Society terms "the living history of everyone's unique life experiences", enables "people who have been hidden from history to be heard."<sup>14</sup> It is worth pointing out here that many practitioners of verbatim theatre today also state that their intention in writing their plays is to provide a record for those marginalised or excluded from the official record of history.

Cheeseman's plays had a significant influence on the development of other theatre companies including John McGrath's theatre company, 7:84, and Banner Theatre, and on the creation of "small-scale touring theatre for working-class audiences in non-theatre spaces" (Watt, 2003:46). This led to such plays as McGrath's *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black Black Oil* (1973) which used songs, sketches and verbatim material to explore the exploitation of the Highlands,<sup>15</sup> and Banner's verbatim work, *Saltley Gate* (1976), about the mass picket during the 1972 miners' strike.

Parallel to these plays, inspired by the tradition of oral history and facilitated by the development of recording devices, another quite different form of verbatim theatre was emerging from Germany and America. Here, several playwrights were creating works drawn from documents, particularly trial transcripts. It is worth noting here the suggestion by Támara Holzapfel (1976:16) that it is significant that this form of play emerged after 1961, the year of the Eichmann trial. These new plays included Peter Weiss's *The Investigation* about the postwar

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<sup>13</sup> Appraisals of Cheeseman's work can be found in Elvgren, 1974:86-98 and Paget, 1987: 317-336.

<sup>14</sup> British Oral History Society. <http://www.ohs.org.uk> . Accessed 10 February 2010.

<sup>15</sup> For the way in which McGrath employs music and humour to deliver his message, seen Drew Milne "Cheerful History: The Political Theatre of John McGrath" *New Theatre Quarterly*, 18, 2002, pp.313-324.

trials of the Auschwitz guards, Heinar Kipphardt's *In the Matter of J. Robert Oppenheimer* (*In der Sache J. Robert Oppenheimer*, 1964), which was a dramatisation of the atom bomb scientist's arraignment for supposed communist sympathies and Eric Bentley's *Are You Now Or Have You Ever Been?: The Investigations of Show-Business by the Un-American Activities Committee 1947-1958* (1972).<sup>16</sup> It is these plays which inspired Tricycle Theatre's recent series of tribunal plays, an inspiration which Kent acknowledges, describing *Are You Now Or Have You Ever Been?* as "the granddaddy of all this" (Robert Butler, 1999).

An examination of the two strains of verbatim plays being performed in the 1960s and early 1970s reveals that it was Cheeseman's productions in Stoke-on-Trent which adopted the non-naturalistic production style of the Living Newspaper tradition, including songs of the period and sketches. But what is different in both strains of verbatim plays at this period from those of the earlier Living Theatre tradition is that so much emphasis is placed on a precise recreation of the exact words of the original speaker. Bentley underlines this in the set of rules which he followed in *Are You Now or Have You Ever Been?*, "whereby no fiction will be foisted on [the audience] as fact." The strength of these rules he stresses, is in their visibility, which will prevent audience deception:

The main rule I went by was to put into people's mouths only the words they had used and which they had placed on the public record. No investigative reporting. No confidential sources. Just what people said in public, and for the public, with a stenographer taking it all down for later use by the printer (1988:7).

These rules may be seen as the foundation of the methodology of much contemporary verbatim theatre.

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<sup>16</sup> For an analysis of documentary plays of the 1960s see Dan Isaac, "Theatre of Fact" *The Drama Review*, 15, 3 (Summer), 1971, pp. 109-135.

One key difference between Cheeseman's plays and those of Weiss and Kipphardt is that of authorial intervention and intent. Cheeseman, as Gillete Elvgren points out (1974:91), was determined to remain objective with regard to his use of his material and not to write the plays as a form of propaganda:

I believe in the power of the artist, but I believe his job is something that is important in itself. It is not a function of politics, a manipulation of politics. Art is independent of education, it lives on its own [...] [The artist] must be free from any association with any form of political alignment. [...] We have to find a way of asking disturbing questions which do not take a single viewpoint or single political alignment. (Elvgren, 1974:91)

This is the opposite of Weiss's view that documentary theatre should take sides. In "14 Propositions for a Documentary Theatre" (1968), he states his belief that an event or moment in history be 'moulded' to fit the playwright's personal ideology (cited in Elvgren, 1974:91). Similarly, Kipphardt edited down thousands of pages of transcript to make a specific political case about McCarthyism in the Fifties in the United States.

There is, however, another strain of verbatim theatre which emerged in the 1970s and which can be seen as one of the strongest influences on contemporary verbatim theatrical practice. This third strain came about through the rehearsal methods of the theatre company Joint Stock, and the director, Max Stafford-Clark. These methods began by drawing on the life experiences of the actors for workshop activities, but were expanded to include interviews carried out by the actors which were subsequently workshopped within the group. This technique was first

employed in 1976 to create *Yesterday's News* (Joint Stock and Jeremy Seabrook). I will explore the genesis of this play at some length since it demonstrates both the methodology that continues to be used by Stafford-Clark, and the aleatory nature of many verbatim plays and how they depend on chance encounters with news items as well as with witnesses.

Stafford-Clark and William Gaskill<sup>17</sup> both recount the lack of progress experienced by the company, who were trying to devise a play to follow Hare's *Fanshen*, and they could not find a play from developing scenes from the lives of the cast. (Roberts and Stafford-Clark, 2007:23; Hammond & Steward, 2008:47). Stafford-Clark recalls:

So we abandoned ship, and Bill said, 'Well, let's do a verbatim play.'<sup>18</sup> None of us had a clue what that meant.<sup>19</sup> But we scoured the newspapers looking for material, and David Rintoul, who was an actor in the company, found this press clipping about [Colonel Callan, executed in July, 1976, for mercenary activity, including the murder of fourteen of his own men in Angola] and Bill said, 'Well, let's do a story about that.' (Hammond & Steward, 2008:47)

*Yesterday's News*, however, did not come to life until the cast and director met two mercenary soldiers. Stafford-Clark describes how it was hearing their testimony and understanding the way they approached their work which informed the genesis of the play:

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<sup>17</sup>Gaskill was artistic director of the Royal Court Theatre from 1965 to 1972 and co-founded Joint Stock with Stafford-Clark, David Hare and David Aukin.

<sup>18</sup> This appears to be the first recorded use of the term.

<sup>19</sup> Stafford-Clark subsequently observes that Gaskill's confidence in the form was because of his previous work drawing on verbatim testimony for *Eleven Men Dead at Hola Camp* (1959), based on a massacre in Kenya during the Mau Mau uprising, and written by Gaskill and Keith Johnstone (Hammond & Steward, 2008:49).

One had been a para and one had been in the SAS. [...] And they talked about the best way of laying an electronic ambush in order to kill the most number of people, and they talked about it like a wine connoisseur would discuss different years of wine. And they were fascinating, really good raconteurs and absolutely racist. (Hammond & Steward, 2008:48)

The methodology used to devise *Yesterday's News* became the foundation for all subsequent Joint Stock and Out of Joint verbatim productions<sup>20</sup>, created through interviews carried out by the actors and subsequently workshopped in rehearsal. The methodology of Hare's and Soans's recent plays can thus be traced back to this earlier work based on testimony.

The use of actors workshopping their own experiences continued to be used by Joint Stock for many new plays, including Howard Brenton's *Epsom Downs* in 1977 and Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine* in 1979, but it was not until *Falkland Sound/Voces de Malvinhas* (Louise Page, 1982) that interviews carried out by the company were again employed as the text of a verbatim work. *Falkland Sound/Voces de Malvinhas* has, as its title suggests, two separate halves: the first is a dramatisation of the letters to his father from the naval officer, David Tinker, who died in the Falklands War, aged twenty-five. The letters had already appeared in print<sup>21</sup> and this part of the play is an adaptation of the book, but the second part of the play is an original verbatim piece, created through a number of interviews with people who had been involved in the Falklands War. These include an English schoolteacher in Port Stanley, an Anglo-Argentine businessman and a disillusioned London war correspondent. The play caused controversy in the British media at the

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<sup>20</sup> Out of Joint was founded by Stafford-Clark and Sonia Friedman in 1993 as a successor to Joint Stock.

<sup>21</sup> *A Message from the Falklands*, 1982, compiled by Hugh Tinker, London: Penguin.

time because of the inclusion of an alternative (Argentinian) point of view when Britain had so recently been at war with Argentina.<sup>22</sup>

Paget cites *Falkland Sound/Voces de Malvinhas* as an example of metropolitan plays which are investigative, and “address some *present*”<sup>23</sup> national controversy” (1987:322). He notes two further examples, both of which were based on the 1984-85 miners’ strike, *Enemies Within* by Ron Rose (1985) and *The Garden of England*, edited by the 7:84 theatre company and Peter Cox (1984-1985). Paget notes the different performance style of these plays from the “road-show style” of plays which celebrate local communities. It is, however, plays that address national issues which emerge in the 1990s as the preferred form of verbatim theatre. It is also interesting to note that David Thacker, the director of *Enemies Within* was criticised for the style of the play and that this criticism and its rebuttal anticipates many of the arguments about verbatim theatre today:

I’m quite happy to have a lot of people standing on stage just talking to the audience for two and a half hours. The fact that you’ve got a variety of different people, a variety of different stories, experiences – the collage effect that you get together – must contain variety, difference of tone and shape. If that’s the case, I’m very happy just having actors standing there talking to the audience. (Paget, 1987:322)

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<sup>22</sup> It is interesting to note that when the play was revived (Finborough Theatre, 2002) it was only the first part of the play, *Falkland Sound*, that was produced. The play thus becomes a tribute to a soldier, and while it remains a play about the futility of war, it eschews the political edge of the earlier version.

<sup>23</sup> Paget’s italics.



## 1.2 The Rise of a Theatre of Reportage and Witness: Verbatim Practices Today

*Theatre, of all the arts, surely works at the interface between the creative and the political, calling together audiences of citizens to contemplate their society or its ways.*

– John McGrath, 2002:236

*I believe that [what happened at Deepcut]<sup>24</sup> is a vital story of our times that we should not ignore and I believe the theatre is the place to tell it.*

– Philip Ralph, 2008:22

Verbatim theatre began to be noticed as a genre at the beginning of the twenty-first century, but examples of verbatim plays exist many years prior to this,<sup>25</sup> in some cases continuing an unbroken line from the developments of the 1960s and 1970s. As was the case with the earlier plays, these new plays were produced in separate contexts, and without reference to each other. Indeed, one could say that a significant change in how verbatim theatre is viewed now, from the way it was viewed in previous periods, is that these disparate forms of verbatim theatre are now seen and assessed collectively.

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<sup>24</sup> The military barracks is Deepcut and Ralph's play *Deep Cut*. The text will reflect this difference.

<sup>25</sup> The media can sometimes be slow to pick up on cultural changes or acknowledge the link between the new flourishing of a genre with previous examples of the genre. One notes Dominic Dromgoole's suggestion in *The Guardian* that Hare in creating *Stuff Happens* (2004) "has invented a new theatrical form" (2004:19), and Neal Ascherson's comment that *The Permanent Way* "is something else. It might be called 'verbatim theatre'" (2003:6). That this has been seen before and commented on in some detail is not acknowledged, but, as Paget notes, such views demonstrate how little of "what we do in the academy registers on the radar of the wider culture" (2009:232).

In the United States, two of the most influential playwrights working in this genre at the latter part of the twentieth century were Emily Mann and Anna Deveare Smith. Both writers confront contemporary issues through documentary form: Mann through a collage of styles, using personal testimony and the recollection of trauma, and Smith through a personal embodiment of different characters. In Smith's plays, she herself acts the roles of both sexes and all races and ages. In *Fires in the Mirror* (1992), for example, based on riots in the New York district of Crown Heights in 1991, when a black boy was killed by a car in a rabbi's motorcade and a Jewish student murdered in retaliation for the death, Smith plays out the conflict between the Jewish (Hasidic) and black New York communities. Using verbatim testimony, she takes on the various roles of a Hasidic female teacher, the New York activist, the Reverend Al Sharpton, a black woman rapper, an elderly rabbi and an Australian Jewish male barrister, among many others.

Mann began writing her testimonial plays in the 1970s, and her work is one example of the continuity of verbatim plays from that period to the present day. It is fair to say that the discontinuity between the plays of the 1930s and the 1960s (identified by Paget, 2009:224-232) did not recur in the period between the 1970s and the 1990s. During these years there is no sense of a broken tradition that has to be rediscovered or relearned: Kent and Norton-Taylor, in initiating their own series of tribunal plays, are aware of the earlier examples, and Stafford-Clark and Out of Joint continued to develop the method of using testimony workshopped in rehearsal to develop new plays, as well as creating three plays which are completely based on verbatim material (*A State Affair* (Soans, 2000), *The Permanent Way*, *Talking To Terrorists*). However, the most significant development in verbatim theatre during the 1980s and 1990s was in educational and therapeutic contexts. Here, the form of verbatim theatre

which emerged from the tradition of the Radio Ballads was developed in Theatre in Education (TIE), in prisons and in centres for the elderly.

Pam Schweitzer, who founded the Age Exchange Theatre Trust in 1983, the first full-time professional theatre company to use the memories of elderly people to create verbatim plays, traces her own journey from the Radio Ballads and Cheeseman's "social documentaries" (2007:15) to the TIE work in schools in England in the 1970s and describes her work as a "reminiscence-based version of the TIE form" (2007:16). Her own company led to the foundation of the European Reminiscence Network and the development worldwide of verbatim plays created from the memories of the elderly.

That this area of theatre is not widely known by the public is because, for the most part, it plays to selected audiences, often within the institutions where it is created or within allied institutions. In many cases, those who produce the work also form the audience. However, within the last ten years this tradition of personal testimony created for a specific audience has begun to develop into a form of personal testimony for a wider audience. This change is found in the plays created by a number of charities which use theatre as a tool to inform the public about their work. The best known examples are the asylum plays created by Sonja Linden for her company, iceandfire, which she founded in 2003 specifically to use theatre as a means "to communicate stories that make real and relevant the impact of human rights issues on our everyday lives".<sup>26</sup>

Linden began as a writer-in-residence for the charity Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture and, following the success of her plays, *Asylum Monologues* and *Asylum Dialogues*, iceandfire has created

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<sup>26</sup> <http://iceandfire.co.uk/about-us/>. Accessed 10 February 2010.

a number of plays drawn from testimony on other issues. These include *Palestine Monologues* (Linden, 2008), *Rendition Monologues* (Christine Bacon, 2008), which is scripted from first-hand accounts of men who have been victims of ‘extraordinary rendition’, and *The Illegals* (Bacon, 2009), based on the accounts of migrants living and working in London without formal immigration papers.

The plays created by iceandfire are presented around Britain in small theatres and community venues by actors who offer their time freely to the charity. The aim of each performance is to educate the audience on a specific issue, and the productions are combined with educational material and suggestions to the audience about further actions they could take. As a propagandist tool, it is not hard to see why iceandfire would embrace verbatim theatre, or a play such as Natasha Walter’s *Motherland* (2008),<sup>27</sup> which is created from edited testimonies from interviews with mothers and children who had been or were currently detained at Yarl’s Wood Detention Centre. This was originally produced at the Young Vic for the Helen Bamber Foundation to highlight the issues of asylum seekers in Britain and the detention of children. Equally, *This is A True Story: a theatrical monologue from Death Row, USA* (Thomas Wright and Nicholas Harrington, 2001), was written by a lawyer working for the charity Reprieve to highlight the case of a man with the mind of an eight-year-old who has been on Death Row for over a quarter of a century. Verbatim testimony in these plays is used as a propaganda tool: in the same way that charities incorporate narratives of victims in their fund-raising print material, the personal narratives in the plays are employed to personalise an issue.

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<sup>27</sup> There are three verbatim plays with this title. Elyse Dodgson’s play about West Indian immigration (1984), Steve Gilroy’s play about women caught up in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (2007), and Walter’s *Motherland* is also the title of a cross-cultural South Asian and African dance theatre work produced in 2008 by Sampad in association with Tara Arts. In this study, *Motherland* (2008) will refer to Walter’s play and not the dance work.

This propagandist use of verbatim testimony is not common to all contemporary writers of verbatim theatre, but what many of these playwrights have in common is a functional use of theatre. There are exceptions, such as Wright's *I Am My Own Wife*, but the majority of verbatim playwrights in the late twentieth century and today seek to use their plays to inform and educate their audience, to hold governments to account and to expose miscarriages of justice.<sup>28</sup>

The tradition of Weiss, Bentley and Kipphardt was revived by Kent with the Tricycle series of tribunal plays, which began in 1994 with *Half the Picture*, based on the Scott Inquiry into the sale of arms to Iraq. The series includes *The Colour of Justice* (1999) from the transcripts of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry, *Srebrenica* (2005) based on the 1996 Rule 61 Hearings at The Hague, and *Bloody Sunday* (2005), based on the Saville Inquiry. These plays are characterised in performance by their strict adherence to their source material and their naturalist mise-en-scène and acting style, though it should be noted that there are differences between *Half the Picture* and subsequent tribunal plays. It is this first play which is closest to the tradition of the tribunal plays created by Weiss and, as Megson notes, “utilises specific theatrical techniques that place it squarely in the European tradition of documentary performance-making” (2009:198). In *Half the Picture*, the verbatim inquiry transcripts, edited by Richard Norton-Taylor, are interspersed with short invented monologues written by John McGrath. The Tricycle tribunal plays are, as Megson observes, “the meticulous re-enactment of edited transcripts of state-sanctioned inquiries that address perceived miscarriages of justice and flaws in the operations and accountability of public institutions” (2009:195).

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<sup>28</sup> The functions of verbatim theatre are analysed by Martin, who lists six functions of the form (2006:12-13) and Paget, who lists five (2009:227-228).

Theatre, employing verbatim texts to substantiate the truth of their narratives, appears to have become a source of information for audiences. One explanation for this development is the failure of other media. It can be argued that since theatre is not bound by the fixed codes of media practice, and has a history of provocation, it offers a way to reveal information that other media might find problematic. As David Aaronovitch observes in an article on *The Permanent Way*, “theatre can question where journalists often can’t” (2004). Another reason is a preceived lack of in-depth analysis in newspapers. Kent gives this as his reason for commissioning Norton-Taylor to write his first tribunal play, *Half the Picture* (Hammond & Steward, 2008:140). People, he believed, were not aware of the constitutionally important information that was being revealed in the Scott Inquiry (convened to establish whether the government had broken its own laws in relation to selling arms to Iraq). The wish to make the public aware of important issues raised by inquiries that were not televised, were “ill-attended” and which, as Kent notes, newspapers reported only in a “cursory, edited version” (Hammond & Steward, 2008:138), led to the subsequent tribunal plays.

Hare alleges that verbatim theatre “does what journalism fails to do” (Hammond & Steward, 2008:62), a thought echoed by Lyn Gardner, reviewing *Deep Cut* in *The Guardian*, (2008) who sees the power of the play as an example that “theatre can sometimes do what journalism has failed to”. Indeed, the play itself criticises the press for their failure to investigate the deaths of four young soldiers at Deepcut Barracks. In his introduction to *Deep Cut*, Ralph notes that the press, with a few notable exceptions, “has been singularly unable to encompass and communicate, other than via lurid headlines or repeated government soundbites” (2008:22). Blank and Jensen argue that *The Exonerated* needed to be written because “our national media culture works as hard as it can to shut down most questions” (2005b:20). Furthermore, the significant

number of journalists writing verbatim plays (including Norton-Taylor, Walter, Katherine Viner and Victoria Brittain) may suggest that they find newspapers have become an inadequate medium.

The failure of the press is not a new idea; the implication of the term 'living newspaper' as Harker notes, "was that the official print media was [sic] either inert, moribund or already dead" (2009:26) and Weiss claims that documentary theatre offers a way to cut through the media reports which are "slanted to the point of view of powerful interests" (1971:41). Devere Smith says that the media coverage of the Crown Heights conflict, the subject of *Fires in the Mirror*, "intensified misunderstanding and hatred" because of the way in which it polarised the event: "Black media reports generally presented the conflict as an anti-racist struggle and dismissed or trivialized charges of anti-Semitism. Jewish newspapers often blamed 'black agitators' and spoke of 'pogroms'" (1993:xliv). She notes that the mainstream media, which was criticised by both sides, portrayed the Jewish community as victims and "Blacks as victimizers".

When audiences turn to the theatre for political education, it suggests that other sources of information and forums for debate are closed to them. Public demand for issues to be more widely aired, even when – or perhaps especially when – governments do not wish such issues to be discussed openly, is reflected in the speech by the barrister Geoffrey Robertson QC in 2003, when he applied to the High Court for the Hutton Inquiry to be televised.<sup>29</sup> The inquiry, he told the judge, would in any case appear on television following its recreation as a play, as previous inquiries had. This showed "the appetite, legitimate appetite of the public, for information beyond the press, beyond the bare written words

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<sup>29</sup> The Hutton Inquiry examined the background to the death of Dr David Kelly, the British Government's chief advisor on Iraq's chemical and biological weapons programme. Norton-Taylor's edited version of the Inquiry became the tribunal play *Justifying War* (2003).

of what happened”.<sup>30</sup> Robertson implies that the tribunal play offers a more in-depth version of events than is generally found in the media.

What may be lacking in other media coverage of events is a clear narrative that explains the context or implications of an event or issue. Such a narrative would have previously been found in in-depth investigative documentaries of the type broadcast by Granada Television in the 1970s. Kent, indeed, argues that the tribunal plays also fill a gap left by the current “dearth” of in-depth documentaries on television:

You used to have *World in Action*, and plays like *Cathy Come Home*; you used to see four or five documentaries a week on television, good documentaries. All that’s gone and there’s very little serious documentary work done on television. [...] Theatre has taken over that role. (Hammond & Steward, 2008:162)

It is not that there are no television documentaries, but their previous form of in-depth investigation has been replaced by an emphasis on character, demonstrated in reconstruction. Or, as Edgar observes, television’s priorities “have shifted from doc to dram” (2008:18).

The need to create theatre from factual sources may also derive from perceived lacunae within existing political frameworks and a sense of disempowerment in the individual. Many plays demonstrate the failure of the police, the judiciary and the government to provide an adequate response to injustice. It is, as Jeffers notes, “a reflection of frustrations with the political process” (2006:1). Luckhurst (2008:200), Ralph (2008:22-23) and Paul Brown, who has developed verbatim plays in Australia since the 1990s, see the growth of the genre as a result of the lack of public trust in both the media and governments. Describing his

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<sup>30</sup> <http://www.doollee.com/PlaywrightsN/norton-taylor-richard.html>. Accessed 10 February 2010.



play *Maralinga*, created from testimonies about British nuclear testing in Australia, Brown writes that it is written “for a society no longer trusting of government reports, newspaper stories or other forms of ‘official’ history” (2006:40). Hare summarises the way in which “the trivial and partial coverage” of other media has led to the need for theatre to undertake the role of journalist:

Audiences, at this time of global unease, urgently feel the need for a place where things can be put under sustained and serious scrutiny. They want the facts, but also they want the chance to look at the facts together, and in some depth. (2005:28)

It would seem that the current development of verbatim theatre and the popularity of the genre reside in its claims to offer a more complete view of events, or one that is otherwise unavailable. The genre celebrates its difference from other plays through the label ‘verbatim’; its claims to provide ‘the facts’ are based upon its adherence to its primary source material. Whether or not that material is reliable is the subject of the following chapter.

## 2

### This Is A True Story: Issues Of Reality, Authenticity and Representation

*If we want to understand the minimal claim of the documentary, it is simple facticity: the indexical value of the documents is the corroboration that something happened, that events took place.*

– Janelle Reinelt, 2009:10

*I thought true stories would be far more powerful than anything that could come from a playwright's mind, [...] Even if you think you know what happened, you don't know what happened.*

– Jeffrey Bruner, in Metz, 2006

In 1958 Harold Pinter wrote: “There are no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false. A thing is not necessarily either true or false; it can be both true and false.”<sup>31</sup> Returning to these words in his Nobel Prize lecture, he affirmed his belief “that these assertions still make sense and do still apply to the exploration of reality through art. So as a writer I stand by them but as a citizen I cannot. As a citizen I must ask: What is true? What is false?” (2005).

Verbatim theatre, I would suggest, collapses these oppositions. It constructs the audience as citizens and it calls the audience, as did Neruda (quoted by Pinter in the same lecture), to: “Come and see the

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<sup>31</sup> Cited in Nobel Prize lecture (Pinter, 2005).

blood in the streets.”<sup>32</sup> Engagement with an event lies at the heart of verbatim theatre, as does engagement with the witness of an event, and this chapter examines the claims that events and witnesses depicted in verbatim plays are both real and true.<sup>33</sup>

Through individual case studies, this chapter offers a critical account of some of the claims made by the practitioners of verbatim theatre and poses the questions: Does verbatim theatre advance claims to truth that differ from those of wholly fictional plays? If so, what are these truth claims and to what extent do the plays validate them? This chapter will also offer an examination of the notions of authenticity and representation.

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<sup>32</sup>*Venid a ver la sangre por las calles* from “I’m Explaining a Few Things” (*Explico Algunas Cosas*) from *Tercera Residencia* (1947) Trans. Nathaniel Tarn, *Selected Poems: A Bilingual Edition* London: Cape, 1970.

<sup>33</sup> The term ‘truth claims’ is often used as a shorthand for such assertions of veracity and will be used in this sense in this chapter.

## 2.1 Testing the Document: *Bloody Sunday* and *Cuts*

In her account of the rehearsals by Emily Mann of her play *Execution of Justice* (1984-6), which is based on a transcript of the trial of Daniel James White for the murders in 1978 of the liberal Mayor of San Francisco, George Moscone, and Supervisor Harvey Milk, Susan Letzler Cole describes an incident with one of the actors. This actor has a problem with one of the lines of the script, Mann sympathises with him and tells him that she wishes she could change it, to make it clearer, but regrets that she cannot do this because “it’s transcript” (1992:58). For many practitioners working in verbatim theatre, the strength of the plays lies in adherence to the primary source material. “I don’t want to go to a play and not be certain if it’s true,” Kent says of plays which combine verbatim testimony with scenes that are invented (Stoller, 2005).

Kent’s comment stems from a belief that the truth claims made by the plays depend on the audience believing in the veracity of the text and of the documents which form the text; the play stands or falls on the integrity of the playscript. Norton-Taylor, for example, claims that “exposing the truth has been the goal of each of our tribunal plays” (Hammond & Steward, 2008:106). Yet the audience at these tribunal plays might well ask what truths are exposed in these plays: Are they discovering what actually happened or simply witnessing an accurate portrayal of an inquiry which is trying to find out what happened? The two are clearly not the same. The tribunal plays are edited extracts from lengthy judicial inquiries, but other verbatim plays are based on evidence which includes oral testimony, written documentation and “events/hearsay”.<sup>34</sup> The reliability of documents clearly varies, and if one is to test the truth claims made by verbatim plays, it is necessary to test

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<sup>34</sup> Gupta’s description of her sources for certain scenes in *Gladiator Games*, (2005:32).

the documents on which they are based, as well the way in which they are edited and represented by the playwright.

### 2.1.1 “Tools for the exposure of injustice and subterfuge”: *Bloody Sunday*

*Bloody Sunday* is the fifth of Norton-Taylor’s tribunal plays written for the Tricycle Theatre, and is one of several plays written about the events of 30 January 1972 in Northern Ireland, which has come to be known as Bloody Sunday. Thirteen civilians died when British soldiers of the 1<sup>st</sup> battalion of the Parachute Regiment opened fire on a civil rights march in Londonderry/Derry.<sup>35</sup> Norton-Taylor’s play is an edited version of the transcripts of the Saville Inquiry held in Northern Ireland and London from 2000 to 2004.<sup>36</sup> A particular feature of this play is that documents themselves are the focus of the inquiry; that is to say, the transcript on which the script is based is itself a document based on an investigation into the veracity of other documents. This section will examine the use of these documents, and will also ask whether the play itself is an objective presentation of the transcript of the Inquiry, or whether the play represents a specific point of view.

Documents, and the potential unreliability of documents, are central in *Bloody Sunday*, a fact that is evident from opening of the play, where an extract from Lord Widgery’s conclusion to his report into Bloody Sunday<sup>37</sup> is shown on screens above the stage. His report sets out the previous point of view of the British judiciary that some responsibility for the deaths should be placed on those who died and exonerates all the individual soldiers. Its use indicates the extent to which the play will be an examination of previous documents and their possible unreliability. The Widgery Report, indeed, is a document that is widely held to be

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<sup>35</sup> As Carole-Anne Upton observes, even the name of the city is problematic, since it is contested by the nationalist and unionist communities (2009:193).

<sup>36</sup> The opening statement, however, was given in 1998.

<sup>37</sup> Published in April 1972.

unreliable; one could say, in fact, that the Saville Inquiry exists because the Widgery Report has never been accepted in Northern Ireland.

From this, it may be said that the role of the Saville Inquiry is not to try to establish precisely what happened on 30 January 1972, the details of which may never be known, but to assess the conflicting claims of what happened. Thus the questions to the witnesses are often not about the events, but about how these events have been reported or recorded. The cross-examination in the Inquiry is more about testing the accuracy of previous documents than about hearing new testimony. Christopher Clarke, QC, counsel to the Inquiry, in his questioning of witnesses, for example, refers to these documents constantly. His opening question to the first witness<sup>38</sup>, Bishop Daly, is to ask him whether he has his statement with him. Clarke then refers to the statement throughout his questioning, using the phrase “you describe” twelve times and “you say” twice (2005:8 -14).

The Saville Inquiry, one might say, is archaeological; it sifts evidence to try to establish a clear picture of a moment in the past. In this, I feel it differs from some of the previous inquiries which have been edited into plays by Norton-Taylor. These have been about disclosure: they have exposed government mendacity in the Scott Inquiry and the “institutionalised racism”<sup>39</sup> of the police demonstrated in the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry. Norton-Taylor endorses this; he asserts that the tribunal plays are “tools for the exposure of injustice and subterfuge” and “a means of providing insight into hidden processes and scenarios” (Hammond & Steward, 2008:130, 131). However, I think there is a subtle

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<sup>38</sup> Bishop Daly is the first witness in the play. In reality, the first witness was Matthew Connolly, questioned on 2 October 2000, the 52<sup>nd</sup> day of the hearing. Bishop Daly appeared before the Inquiry on Tuesday 6 February 2001. Similarly, Reg Tester was not the last witness in the Inquiry, as he is in the play. He gave evidence on 22 January 2004. <http://www.bloody-sunday-inquiry.org.uk/index2.asp?p=3>. Accessed 10 February 2010.

<sup>39</sup> The conclusion reached by the Macpherson Report, 1999.

difference between the careful balancing of evidence in the Saville Inquiry and the probing of witnesses to uncover information that was previously hidden in the other inquiries.

An exception is *Justifying War*, in which documents are also placed under forensic examination. *Justifying War* examines the dossier employed by the British government to persuade the public of the need to invade Iraq.<sup>40</sup> The play tests the claim by journalists that this dossier was “sexed up” by Alastair Campbell, the Prime Minister’s Director of Communications and Strategy, and draws on emails, notes from personal organisers, written diaries, audio and televised broadcasts and newspaper articles. The central document is thus tested against other documents.

In *Bloody Sunday*, as in *Justifying War*, the audience watch how the Inquiry analyses every word of every previous report.<sup>41</sup> Even language itself is seen to be open to question. In *Bloody Sunday*, the name of the city, for example, as noted above, is challenged, and this uncertainty around the name of Londonderry/Derry is demonstrated throughout the play (and reflects the use of the names in the Inquiry). The witnesses who represent the Republican and Catholic community use the name Derry, as do the counsel who represent them, such as Michael Mansfield, but members of the British Army and those representing them, use the name Londonderry.

Upton argues in her assessment of several plays based on the events of 30th January that: “Documentary theatre tends to base its claim to authenticity on the assumption, explicit or implicit, that the source

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<sup>40</sup> The same evidence is again under scrutiny at the time of writing, in the Iraq Inquiry, chaired by Sir John Chilcot.

<sup>41</sup> The Inquiry, indeed, spent several months discussing the written and oral evidence with counsel before the witness examinations began.

documents are themselves incontestably ‘true’” (2009:179).<sup>42</sup> I am taking her use of the word ‘true’ here to mean authentic, and this is certainly the case with the tribunal plays as it was with the tribunal plays of Weiss, for whom documents were central to discovering the facts behind official concealment. As Megson observes, in the plays of Weiss “paperwork is reified as the catalyst of revelation” (2009:198). However, while Norton-Taylor carves his script from the authentic transcript of an inquiry, he also uses his plays to demonstrate the unreliability of documents which are cited in that inquiry. In *Justifying War*, the former BBC defence and diplomatic correspondent, Andrew Gilligan, recalls in his notes that the dossier had been transformed the week before publication “to make it sexier” (2003:14). In *Bloody Sunday*, General Ford, the Commander of Land Forces in Northern Ireland, is confronted with the statement in his account of 30<sup>th</sup> January in which he writes that the “CO of 1 Para”<sup>43</sup> confirmed his view that British troops “had been fired on and had returned fire” (2005:56). Under cross-examination he admits: “I do not know why I wrote it in that way. I had only a mental view. I saw nothing.” His attitude is later contradicted by an audio tape of two Army officers, saying that Ford had said that the shooting was “the best thing he had seen for a long time” (2005:56-57). Documents are clearly seen here to be contradictory.

Documents are foregrounded in the naturalistic re-enactment of the tribunal, which includes constant reference to the mountains of files on and around the desks and to texts on the computer monitors. The tribunal plays are, as Reinelt notes in her description of *The Colour of Justice*, a “meticulous recreation of surface realism” (2006:79). This effect suggests the authenticity of documents, and this visual presentation is

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<sup>42</sup> She compares *Bloody Sunday* unfavourably to other verbatim plays about the event, particularly David Duggan’s *Scenes from an Inquiry* (2008), which questions notions of truth within the Inquiry (2009:193).

<sup>43</sup> Commanding Officer of the 1st Battalion of the Parachute Regiment, Colonel Derek Wilford.



very different, I would suggest, from the ironic way in which documents are presented in plays written and directed by Moisés Kaufman. In Tectonic Theater Project's *Gross Indecency*, his presentation of the trials of Oscar Wilde, Kaufman uses different, and contradictory, versions of the trials to explore their individual truth claims. Kaufman also places on stage the documents in which the trials are reported, but only to hold them up as objects of unreliable testimony.

Norton-Taylor does not compare source material in the same way as Kaufman, because he adheres to the text of the transcript of the various judicial inquiries and, with a few exceptions, noted by him,<sup>44</sup> to their chronology. He states that in selecting the excerpts from the transcripts of inquiries, he endeavours to be as fair and unbiased as possible (1999:6). This is a claim which, I believe, requires examination. In the case of *Bloody Sunday*, this is a play carved out from an inquiry which lasted several years, included two thousand five hundred witness statements and heard oral evidence from nine hundred and twenty-one witnesses (2005:5). The play is thus, inevitably, a fragment of a whole. Upton is critical of Norton-Taylor's *Bloody Sunday*, and holds that the "claims to representational authenticity made by the production" are inadequate because the play relies on the transcript of the Inquiry, and provides a sympathetic portrayal of victims of injustice, rather than an interrogation of judicial responsibility (2009:186-187). I cannot agree with this assessment; the partial failure (in my opinion) of this play is not because of its reliance on the transcript, but its editing of the transcript, which I feel demonstrates a clear bias. It is not that the play fails to interrogate the system of judicial inquiries (which is not its intention), but that it selects particular moments from the Inquiry and directs the audience towards a specific point of view.

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<sup>44</sup> One example is the evidence of David Kelly's widow in *Justifying War* which is placed at the end of the play (2003:7)

In his opening statement to the Inquiry, Clarke addresses the tribunal and declares that:

The tribunal's task is to discover as far as humanly possible in the circumstances, the truth. It is the truth as people see it. Not the truth as people would like it to be, but the truth pure and simple, painful or unacceptable to whoever that truth may be. The truth has a light of its own. Although it may be the first casualty of hostility, it has formidable powers of recovery, even after a long interval. (Norton-Taylor, 2005:7)

The search for truth has been a constant theme in the tribunal plays, as Norton-Taylor acknowledges (Hammond & Steward, 2008:108), but I am not persuaded from this play that Norton-Taylor is willing to present a version of the events of Bloody Sunday that may be, as Clarke suggests, unacceptable. By that, I mean unacceptable both in terms of Norton-Taylor's own point of view as well as that of the Tricycle Theatre with its local Irish audience.

Norton-Taylor is on surer ground in *Half the Picture*, which in its recreation of scenes of the Scott Inquiry, reveals a government and civil service which practised "dissembling, buck-passing, hiding behind euphemisms, word play, facetious use of aphorisms, and, above all, the cynicism and amorality of arrogant and unaccountable officials" (Norton-Taylor, Hammond & Steward, 2008:106). Truth, as Ian McDonald, a Ministry of Defence official, told the Inquiry, "is a difficult concept" (Norton-Taylor, 1995:95). Indeed, the scale of how problematic the notion of truth is to civil servants is demonstrated when Sir Robin (now Lord) Butler explains to the Inquiry why half the picture, or any percentage of the picture can be true, even though it may not include all the available information: "These are difficult lines to draw. It is not

justified to mislead, but very often one is finding oneself in a position where you have to give an answer that is not the whole truth, but falls short of misleading” (Norton-Taylor, 1995:91). In the play, a Foreign Office official, Mark Higson, paraphrasing the former Defence Minister, Alan Clark, claims that any civil servant’s job is to be “economical with the truth. Sometimes, for reasons which were not in the public domain we had to sort of give only 75 percent of the story and not 100 percent” (1995:224). *Half the Picture* allows Norton-Taylor to demonstrate his personal beliefs; he is a campaigning journalist who has written several books on the abuse of power.<sup>45</sup>

Norton-Taylor comments that one of the potential dangers in writing *The Colour of Justice* was that of “a kind of musical hall treatment of the police officers on stage as, consciously and unconsciously they exposed their racism, prejudices and incompetence” (Hammond & Steward, 2008:127-128). Yet it could be said that he allows the military in *Bloody Sunday* to appear in this way. One example is the scene in which Mansfield undermines General Ford’s claim that there was a ‘firefight’ and his subsequent declaration: “General Ford, what I put simply is: you have never taken the slightest interest in the victims, have you?” (2005:61), which seems to invite a negative reaction from the audience. It is, perhaps, not surprising that at the performance of *Bloody Sunday* I attended,<sup>46</sup> when Colonel Derek Wilford, commanding officer of the 1st Battalion of the Parachute Regiment, later affirms that his soldiers “behaved admirably” during the civil rights march, this was greeted with laughter from the audience.

There was a temptation to include similar scenes in *Cuts*, as there were many such moments in the Petra Blanksby’s *Inquest*. For example, in my

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<sup>45</sup> These include: *In Defence of the Realm: The Case for Accountable Security and Intelligence Services* (1990), *A Conflict of Loyalties, GCHQ 1984-1991* (1991) and *Truth is A Difficult Concept* (1995).

<sup>46</sup> Tricycle Theatre, 7 April 2005.

original transcript, Leslie Thomas, the barrister representing Petra's family, tells the psychiatrist who refused to admit Petra to Tameside Hospital that "from the family's point of view, you washed your hands of her".<sup>47</sup> Similarly, when Thomas subjects Petra's mental health social worker to intense cross-examination, he ends with the assertion: "May I suggest you failed her?" to which the social worker quietly replies "I did not fail her" before leaving the witness box.<sup>48</sup> I chose not to include the social worker's testimony in the play, although it was more dramatic than that of some other witnesses, because on stage it would inevitably shift the blame from the system to the individual. My notes on the social worker as seen in court describe him as a man who looked ill; he was nervous, his skin was grey and he did not inspire confidence. To reproduce those impressions on stage would be to place him, as it were, in the dock, and without any background knowledge of the man, this seemed to be not only biased, but unjust. Watching him in the witness box, I saw a man; on stage he would become a character who might be judged adversely.

*Bloody Sunday* demonstrates what appears to be an abuse of power by the Army, through its apparent lies and deception. Norton-Taylor recalls how in the Saville Inquiry "soldier after soldier, advised by the Ministry of Defence, repeated the mantra 'I can't remember'" (Hammond & Steward, 2008:110). This is reproduced in the play in the evidence of Soldier F (who gave evidence, like the others, anonymously, behind screens) (2005:84-85) while Soldier S testifies that the statement he had previously given about nail and acid bombs thrown at the soldiers was "inaccurate" and that he had said it "because of the nature of the way things were done at that time" (2005:80). However, the online transcript

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<sup>47</sup> From my transcript of day five of the Inquest. The psychiatrist replied: "That would be very unfair. It's a very difficult decision".

<sup>48</sup> My transcript of day three of the Inquest.

of the Inquiry<sup>49</sup> includes testimony of witnesses, who are alleged to have been members of the IRA, whose lacunae of memory is similar to those of the soldiers. These testimonies are not included in the play, which leads to the conclusion that the audience is being positioned to adopt a certain standpoint, which the playwright prefers. That specific point of view is also reinforced by the use of the theatre gallery for supporters of the families. Although their allegiance is never stated, it is demonstrated by their behaviour: at the beginning of the play, when Bishop Edward Daly is questioned, there is “clapping in the gallery”<sup>50</sup> at his entrance and after his testimony (Norton-Taylor, 2005:7, 18). The gallery is then silent until the moment near the end of the play when Soldier F finally accepts that he was responsible for the shooting of Patrick Doherty. The stage directions indicate: “*People crying, leaving gallery*” (Norton-Taylor, 2005:89). The gallery in the Tricycle Theatre is a part of the auditorium and thus audience and actors here become one. It is, I would suggest, difficult to watch *Bloody Sunday* and believe in the veracity of the military witnesses, but the fact that the play does not allow the audience to question the evasiveness on both sides may be said to demonstrate how the audience is positioned by the play.<sup>51</sup> Fidelity to the document may not be to the entire document.

### 2.1.2 Sourcing the Text: Cuts

The repeated mantra of the verbatim playwright is to state that the play is based on spoken or written evidence: the playscript of *My Name is Rachel Corrie*, for example, notes that: “This text has been edited from her journals and e-mails” (Rickman and Viner, 2005:2). *Cuts* and *Trash*, like many verbatim plays, list their sources, as did Weiss for his later

<sup>49</sup> <http://www.bloody-sunday-inquiry.org.uk/>. Accessed 10 February 2010.

<sup>50</sup> This is also in the original transcript. It is interesting to note that the clapping that greeted two witnesses in the Chilcot inquiry led at least one commentator to note that the Inquiry was “the first draft of a David Hare play” (Ashley, 2010).

<sup>51</sup> The complexity of these issues is underlined by the fact that at the time of writing, in 2010, nearly five years since the Saville Inquiry ended, the report has still not been published.

plays.<sup>52</sup> *Deep Cut* and *Gladiator Games*, in their published versions, go further, listing the sources for each speech in the play (including, in the case of *Gladiator Games*, the scenes that are imagined). The implication of these lists is that the dialogue of the plays is a careful reproduction of the original source material. The task of the playwright is that of editor or collagist. As Slovo notes on her crafting of *Guantanamo*: “The rule is you’re not allowed to create any of the words, and have to be completely faithful to the thing you’re representing”<sup>53</sup>.

This statement highlights two separate issues. The first is demonstrated by the vagueness of the expression ‘the thing’. While this is a common word in spoken discourse, its use is telling, since it encapsulates the uncertainty of the reality which the writer of verbatim plays tries to represent. It leads to a number of questions: What is that ‘thing’ which is being represented? Is it the experience of the family, or the words spoken by the family? Are the words of the family being employed to represent a wider concern? The second and more significant issue is Slovo’s use of the word ‘rule’. Whose rule is this? Who sets this rule and what penalties, if any, are incurred from failing to adhere to it?

The short answer to the penultimate question in terms of Slovo’s play is that this is the rule set by Kent, who commissioned and directed the play. It is based on the tenet articulated by Bentley, noted in the previous chapter,<sup>54</sup> which forms the self-regulation of the Tricycle tribunal plays. Kent himself explains:

Richard [Norton-Taylor] and I have always had certain rules when we work together. For example, if someone asks a question,

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<sup>52</sup>The published edition of *The Investigation* originally contained a list of sources. It was later dropped. See Peter Weiss, (1965) *Die Ermittlung: Oratorium in 11 Gesängen* Frankfurt/Main, p. 211.

<sup>53</sup> Symposium on Verbatim Theatre Practices in Contemporary Theatre, 13 July 2006.

<sup>54</sup> See page 180.

you must never skip to another answer, you always have to give the answer to that question; you can edit the question a little bit, you can edit the answer a bit, but you've got to keep the chronology going. (Hammond & Steward, 2008:152-153)

The rule exists because these plays aim to provide an alternative source of information to other media and therefore should be as reliable, or even more reliable, than print or broadcast sources. When I began to write *Cuts*, Kent's rule appeared to me to be fundamental to the creation of verbatim theatre. If my play was to fulfil my aim of creating awareness of what I believed was a failure of the social system in its treatment of women with personality disorders, I needed to back up my argument with evidence that could be tested for its authenticity and accuracy. It was important that the audience believed in the story because this was a play which would serve, I hoped, to hold authorities to account for their behaviour. I was therefore determined at the outset, that every single word in my play would be 'authentic',<sup>55</sup> that is to say, it would reproduce precisely, if not in full, what was written in the transcripts of speech or in printed documents. I would invent nothing.

The list of documents<sup>56</sup> on which I based *Cuts* covers two pages. These include personal interviews, conversations, transcripts of a trial and an inquest, speeches taken from a filmed documentary, speech recorded in books and academic papers, extracts from newspaper articles, transcripts of parliamentary committees and speeches in Parliament. The list is not dissimilar to that of Weiss, whose list of documents that form the basis of his form of documentary theatre consists of:

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<sup>55</sup> In order to remove the quote marks from further uses of this word, I am employing it in its dictionary definition (OED) as "being in accordance with fact", "true in substance" and "being what it professes in origin". This etymology may help to explain the inherent desirability that is suggested by in the term and why 'authentic' has become a staple of the advertising lexicon, a term of value judgement with a claim to integrity.

<sup>56</sup> See pages 157-158.

Records, documents, letters, statistics, market-reports, statements by banks and companies, government statements, speeches, interviews, statements by well-known personalities, newspaper and broadcast reports, photos, documentary films and other contemporary documents.” (1971:41)

Although I did not invent any of the dialogue in the play, and the text is drawn from these sources, as stated, a more detailed examination of the text of my play reveals that the script is not a precise reproduction of the sources.

It may be useful here to examine the sources of *Cuts* in terms of which may be seen as the most reliable, and which may be contestable. The least contestable, perhaps, in terms of what was said are speeches made in Parliament, reported in Hansard and in the Hansard web archives,<sup>57</sup> the transcript of the committal proceedings of Rebecca Gidney, and the transcript taken from the BBC documentary film on Styal Prison. Each of these is an accurate record of what was said. That is not to say that those speaking the words may not make errors in fact or interpretation, but that the words in these documents represent what was spoken. In my use of these documents in the play these words are not changed. The speeches are edited for length, but remain as spoken. I would also note here my use of Petra Blanksby’s exercise books, which are original documents.<sup>58</sup> There is one instance of a change from the original Parliamentary speech to its appearance in the play and that is the speech by Bob Russell, which appears in the play as a radio voice-over.<sup>59</sup> The content of the speech, however, while edited, is not changed.

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<sup>57</sup> <http://www.parliament.uk/publications/archives.cfm>. Accessed 10 February 2010.

<sup>58</sup> They are in the care of Pete Blanksby who gave me permission to record their contents.

<sup>59</sup> See pages 129-131.



After these, the most reliable sources are those of my own personal interviews. These include those which are taped, and therefore can be verified, namely the interviews with Pete Blanksby in 2007, with Pauline Campbell in 2007, with Brian Caton in 2006, Dr Duncan Double in 2007 and Lord Ramsbotham in 2008. In other interviews I took notes during or shortly after the conversations. The next list itemises existing published works, which include books and newspaper articles, and my use of them can be checked against the originals, although the authenticity and accuracy of the extracts of witness speech found in these sources depends on the degree of reliability of the original author.

The least reliable sources are those of which there are no records, since in these cases the dialogue is created from a number of different sources, combining personal interviews, telephone interviews, emails and blogs. This is close to being invented dialogue, and the settings of the wine bar for the interview with the female prison governor and the pub for the interview with Scottish Dave are, in fact, fictions. Indeed, both the Governor and Scottish Dave are composite characters derived from a multiplicity of sources. In creating these, I might be said to be following the example of Norton-Taylor's first tribunal play, *Half the Picture*, with its use of inserted monologues by McGrath. The Governor's and Scottish Dave's dialogue was written to make a specific point and give the perspective of those working inside the prisons. They do not provide the narrative of the play, which explores the death of Petra Blanksby.

The document that forms the backbone of *Cuts* is my transcript of the Coroner's Inquest into Petra's death. Whether the use of this document in the play is a fair record of the transcript is a moot point. I would argue that it is true to the spirit of the Inquest, but that does not mean that I abide by Nicolas Kent's rules. Does this mean that the play presents a reliable record of the Inquest? It must first be noted that the transcript

was my hand-written record of what was said in court and, as I do not have shorthand, it is not possible to guarantee that every word is accurate, only that it is as accurate as fast writing could make it. Moreover, since it was extremely important to record each phrase accurately, there were occasions when I missed the phrase which followed; a comparison between my version and a transcript made from the taped court version would thus almost certainly show gaps and omissions.

The major change, however, from the proceedings of the Coroner's Court and my original transcript of these, to what appears in the play is how I allocate the speech to counsel. At the Inquest, questions were asked of the witnesses by six people: the coroner, David Hinchliff, and five separate barristers. These were Leslie Thomas, appearing on behalf of the family; Richard Copnall, who represented the prison service for the Home Office; Kevin McLoughlin, who appeared for the National Health Service; and Laura Dunmore and John Sharples, who appeared for the Pennine Care NHS Trust. If the play had been simply a re-enactment of the Inquest, all of these legal figures would have been included in the play. However, in using only extracts from the Inquest, what mattered to me was the evidence given by the witnesses and not which of the counsel asked the questions. Thus 'Leslie' is both Leslie Thomas, the barrister who represented the Blanksby family at the Inquest and a composite of others, generally Hinchliff and Copnall.

An example of this can be found in the scenes where the consultant forensic psychiatrist, Dr Keith Rix, gives evidence.<sup>60</sup> The transcript of the Inquest reveals that the opening speeches where, in the play, Leslie Thomas takes the doctor through his qualifications, were actually spoken

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<sup>60</sup> Pages 108-110 and 119-123.

by the Coroner.<sup>61</sup> David Hinchliff, likewise, took every witness through their written evidence prior to their being questioned by counsel, and therefore all the preliminary questions establishing the identity of the witnesses and their relationship with Petra were spoken by him. It would have been possible to introduce the character of the Coroner into the play to carry out this role, but it appeared to me to be a singularly undramatic function; I felt that the questions were not contentious and could therefore just as well be asked by Leslie.

In the questioning of Dr Rix, Leslie questions the statement that “Petra was told she was untreatable”<sup>62</sup> and asks whether her personality disorder “would not benefit from in-hospital treatment”. These enquiries were in fact made by the Coroner. The following four questions in the play were put by Richard Copnall. The questions that were actually posed by Thomas are heard in the second appearance of Dr Rix.<sup>63</sup> In the Inquest, however, Rix was not recalled. He was in the witness box for one full day. The segmentation of his testimony is for dramatic reasons only.

I felt I could combine the questions of Thomas and Copnall and the Coroner at this point because they were all asking similar questions. When it came to the actions of the Pennine Health Authority, whose treatment of Petra had been evaluated by Rix, Copnall and Thomas were equally robust in their interrogation. It should be noted that I did not combine the examination of the prison staff by Copnall and Thomas because here they were on opposite sides<sup>64</sup>. In the examination of Rix, however, when the questioning was similar in tone and intent, I did not feel that by giving all the questions to Leslie, I was in any way changing

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<sup>61</sup> See page 108.

<sup>62</sup> See page 109.

<sup>63</sup> See pages 119 – 123.

<sup>64</sup> In fact, much of this section of the Inquest was omitted, since it related to how Petra was treated in prison and whether any of the staff could have done more to prevent her death, which was not, as noted, the subject of the play.

the tenor of the Inquest. The replies of the witnesses are in all cases unchanged and the points made by the questions are not altered.

Does this re-allocation of cross-examination undermine the audience's belief that the play is an accurate portrayal of the events which led to Petra's death? I would argue that it does not, since the important statements are those of the witnesses and not the counsel. The creation of a composite questioner is not unique to *Cuts*. Holmes, for example, also creates a composite journalist to pose the questions in *Fallujah*.

In *Cuts*, there are also a large number of documents which are physically used on stage and in the installations, and which are representations of actual documents. The cards on the wire, which represent the protest against the closure of the Henderson Hospital,<sup>65</sup> are an amalgam of pictures of cards on the wire and emails that can be found on the websites of the supporters of the Hospital. Another composite document can be found in the installation of the room papered with words used to greet those attending the many inquiries relating to women in prison.<sup>66</sup> Here, words form a more solid artefact, which aims to demonstrate the futility of these inquiries; the words of the committee room are reinvented as a different kind of document.

The theme of *Cuts* is failure, and the inadequacy of some documents is shown to be symptomatic of that failure. Both Petra's mountain of files and the transcripts of witness testimony are viewed as potentially unreliable. The play reveals that documents can be seen as an alternative to action and, thus, as part of a system which lets women down. In the portrayal of the committee room, words have become meaningless, pages

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<sup>65</sup> See pages 104-105.

<sup>66</sup> See pages 165-167.

are ruffled and nothing happens<sup>67</sup>; in the mental health maze documents are torn and drift underfoot:

*There are a number of pieces of paper pinned and stuck to some of the walls. Some are lying on the ground as if discarded. Some are typed, some look as if they have been torn out of books or magazines. Some are hand-written. Some of the texts are written on the walls themselves, like graffiti. (101-102)*

The judicial and medical health systems failed Petra, she and other women died, and the documents serve to demonstrate their failure.

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<sup>67</sup> See page 103.

## 2.2 Testing Witness Testimony: *The Exonerated and Trash*

*These things happened, these people said what they did, and it is not incompatible with the veracity of these things to condemn the perpetrators.*

— Jonathan Holmes, 2007:44

Audiences frequently react to verbatim plays in terms of their authenticity: “Is this all true?” “Was this what they said?” are questions that were asked in the audience debate that followed the first rehearsed reading of *Trash*.<sup>68</sup> The problem for the verbatim playwright lies in making clear the distinctions between verifiable factual events and the stories that they find in witness testimony. Many verbatim playwrights base their versions of events purely on witness testimony, and this section will examine some of the issues that arise from creating plays drawn from such sources.

Most verbatim plays begin with the premise that an event or events took place and aim to inform the audience about what happened. As previously noted, these plays call on the audience to “see the blood in the streets”<sup>69</sup>, and employ witness testimony to verify their accounts. Holmes maintains that in *Fallujah*, “the situations [the characters] find themselves in actually happened, in the way that they are depicted” (2007:141). He bases his knowledge on testimony, and demonstrates his faith in the integrity of the witnesses and the news media:

Nothing is described or presented that was not directly witnessed. The text comes from accounts written by witnesses [...], transcripts of interviews carried out by reputable journalists and

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<sup>68</sup> UEA Studio Theatre, 20 April 2007.

<sup>69</sup> See page 195.

myself; in the case of the former, I have used only material previously published and vetted by the editorial processes of dependable news bureaux. (2007:143)

When testimony is described as evidence it could be said to demonstrate an unusual level of trust in what one person says. The use of testimony in verbatim theatre is not merely to authenticate the action; the witness is not only on stage to authenticate the event, but also, by being on stage, to create an empathetic bond with the listener. Witness testimony is employed to compress the layers of interpretation between the original event and the audience. As a result, the story forms a link between speaker and hearer; as Megson observes, the audience undertakes “a collective act of bearing witness” (2005:371). The playwright Athol Fugard records the effect of this on the audience in his description of a white student attending a performance of Emily Mann’s play about race relations, *Having Our Say: The Delany Sisters’ First 100 Years* (1995). He relates the conversation and recounts how the play affected the girl and led to her assertion that “We must never forget.” When Fugard then questions her knowledge of the Civil Rights Movement, the girl replies:

“... They teach you the history of the Civil Rights Movement at school, but those are just the facts. You don’t really get what it felt like, what it meant to be the victim of prejudice.” “And that is what you are getting this afternoon?” She nodded. “Yes, that and much more.” (Introduction to Mann, 1997:x)

The creation of the empathetic bond may also place the audience in a position of responsibility to do something more than merely listen to the testimony. Wendy Hesford notes this in relation to *Guantanamo*, when the audience listen to the letters written by Moazzam Begg to his father. These letters, she suggests, “implicate audiences by expanding the

imagined rhetorical space of reception and situating listeners as eavesdroppers on private conversations” (206:36). Hesford’s use of the word ‘implicate’ suggests that the act of witnessing creates in the listener a responsibility to respond.

The following sections of this chapter explore the use of witness testimony in *The Exonerated* and *Trash*. *The Exonerated* is chosen because of the power it ascribes to the witnesses; as the title makes clear, the play is based on the testimony of those who have been on death row and have subsequently been released.<sup>70</sup> Both its strength and its potential weakness are rooted in the ways in which the audience relate to those individuals. In my discussion of *Trash*, I explore how I created a play from the words of a witness whom I regarded as potentially unreliable, and the difference that this creates in terms of how the audience relate to her.

### 2.2.1 “An Act of Faith”: Witness Testimony in *The Exonerated*

*Within moments, tears were streaming down our faces: here was this young man, trapped in an unbelievably tragic and terrifying situation. Not much older than us, likely innocent, caught in a system he and half a dozen lawyers couldn’t find a way out of, waiting to be put to death for something he didn’t do. Something happened, hearing his voice, right there, in the room, that took our experience out of the realm of newspaper-story, “isn’t-that-terrible” abstraction, and into the realm of human empathy – where it belonged.*

– Blank and Jensen, 2005a:8

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<sup>70</sup> The use of the word ‘released’ is deliberate. As the chapter will show, not all of them have legally been found innocent, as the title of the play might suggest.



The description by Blank and Jensen of hearing the actual voice of a young man who was on death row, on the telephone, during an anti-death-penalty conference at Columbia Law School, chronicles the moment that led to their writing *The Exonerated* (2005a:8).<sup>71</sup> I have included it at some length because their emotional reaction (“tears were streaming down our faces”) is central to an understanding of the response that many verbatim playwrights expect from their audience. Witness testimony is used precisely, I would suggest, because it can provoke an empathetic bond between the audience and the characters and thus allow the audience to be open to the persuasive argument of the play.

Witnessing involves an act of faith; a contract is formed between the witness and the person who hears the testimony. Dori Laub, as co-founder of the Fortunoff Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, has written extensively on the effect of the act of testimony for speaker and listener, and claims that the listener to an account of severe trauma shares in the “struggle of the victim with the memories and residues of his or her traumatic past. The listener has to feel the victim’s victories, defeats or silences, know them from within, so they can assume the form of testimony” (1992:58). The listener, says Laub, has to “partake” in the testimony, and this shared emotional response is clearly one which Blank and Jensen hope for from their audience, who they note are “automatically involved and implicated in the story” (2005b:19).

*The Exonerated* narrates the case histories of six former death row inmates. It tells of their arrest, trial, incarceration and problems in readjusting to the world following their release. The story it tells is, in many instances, horrifying: my personal reaction on hearing the play (as it is read by actors sitting on an empty stage, it is received aurally) was

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<sup>71</sup> The young man was Leonard Kidd, whose death sentence was commuted by the Governor of Illinois after he watched *The Exonerated*. The play formed a part of Governor Ryan’s consultation into the death penalty and resulted in his decision to commute the sentences of all 167 Death Row inmates to life in prison.

that I felt that it should be read in every American classroom and college and by every politician. This response has been widely shared. The play has been produced throughout America and in Europe, it has won a large number of awards, and a film version has been shown on television. The play presents a powerful case, not just about the death penalty but about judicial abuse, racism and the condition of United States prisons.

The stories told in *The Exonerated* are compelling narratives. In one scene Gary Gauger, for example, notes how the prison was run by gangs “you know, there was ongoing warfare between the different factions” (Blank and Jensen, 2006:55)<sup>72</sup>, Robert Earl Hayes, too, provides a vivid picture of life on death row:

**Robert:** The electric chair was downstairs and I was upstairs, and every Wednesday morning they cranked that electric chair up and you could hear it buzz.

And when they served breakfast, you gotta have sharp ears to hear that front door open, 'cause if you oversleep, the roaches and the rats come and eat your breakfast, and that's the God's honest truth. (2006:55)

The most searing passage in the play is the description by Sunny Jacobs of the execution of her partner in the electric chair, which malfunctioned:

And he didn't die. It took *thirteen and a half*<sup>73</sup> minutes for Jesse to die. Three jolts of electricity that lasted fifty five seconds each. Almost a minute. *Each*. Until finally flames shot out from his head, and smoke came from his ears, and the people that came to

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<sup>72</sup> In the remainder of this section, quotes from *The Exonerated* will be cited by date and page only.

<sup>73</sup> Authors' emphasis.

see the execution, on behalf of the press, are still writing about it.  
*Ten years afterwards.* (2006:76)

It would surely be hard to hear that description of Jesse's execution and feel unmoved. This is a play which aims to combat the death penalty, and which demands of its audience that they confront the reality of an execution. Blank and Jensen note that their aim in writing the play is "to relate as fully as possible what it is like to be wrongly accused and convicted, what it is like to be on death row, and what it is like to get out and be in the world again" (2006:iii).<sup>74</sup> Thus, *The Exonerated* can be said to fulfil Holmes's premise that the collective act of witnessing in such a play is "inescapably ethical, as it requires us to take responsibility for our response to what we experience.[...] it is in this witnessing that art can be a vehicle for resistance to oppression" (2007:xiv).

*The Exonerated* is, therefore, not merely an ethical play, but one with a clear aim which is fundamentally propagandist. As such it has been successful; as has been noted, it has been a contributory factor in the decision of the Governor of Illinois to commute the sentences of all death row prisoners in the state. The play belongs to the tradition of verbatim plays created for propagandist purposes, and which employs the testimony of witnesses, not only as evidence, but to tell a true story.

The veracity of verbatim plays is often stressed: the Australian playwright, Nigel Jamieson, says of his verbatim play *In Our Name*, about Iraqi asylum seekers, "this is absolutely a true story"<sup>75</sup> (Colquhoun, 2004), and Majid Shukur, an Iraqi actor, and himself a refugee, who appeared in the 2004 production of *In Our Name*, states that the importance of the play is "to give people some information about what really happened in those detention centres [...] because it is the right of

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<sup>74</sup> My numbering of unnumbered preliminary pages.

<sup>75</sup> It is interesting that Jamieson feels the phrase "a true story" needs intensification.

Australian people to know the truth”. Jamieson’s and Shukur’s assertions about *In Our Name* are based on their belief in the veracity of verbatim testimony. Shukur amplifies his assertion with the statement that “it is the right of Australian people to know the truth” (Colquhoun, 2004), demonstrating his belief in the integrity of that testimony.

Testimony, however, is not of itself a guarantee of veracity, and while an acceptance of evidential testimony as truth may lead a writer to label his/her play true, this does not mean that it is factually accurate, only that this is how s/he perceives it. The words ‘testimony’ and ‘evidence’ carry a resonance from their use in courts of law, but they are not absolute terms and recent studies in testimony within the judicial system demonstrate that witness evidence is far from reliable<sup>76</sup>.

The psychologist Elizabeth Loftus has worked extensively on what she calls the “malleability of memory” (2003: 231), the effects of time upon memory and the resulting unreliability of eye-witness testimony. She describes how hundreds of people have been falsely convicted on the evidence of witnesses because witness testimony is unreliable.<sup>77</sup> “Our memory system,” she notes, “can be infused with compelling illusory memories of important events.” (2003: 231-233). Yet courts of law and inquiries continue to rely heavily on the testimony of witnesses, as George Fisher and Barbara Tversky note in relation to the United States judicial system:

The fixation on witnesses reflects the weight given to personal testimony. As shown by recent studies, this weight must be

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<sup>76</sup> A useful overview can be found in: Ross, D.F., Read, J.D. and Toglia, M.P.(1994) *Adult Eyewitness Testimony Current Trends and Developments*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>77</sup> Reprieve, Amnesty and other campaigning organisations report, too, on how the development of DNA technology has resulted in the overturning of a number of cases in the USA of people sentenced to death on the testimony of unreliable witnesses.

balanced by an awareness that it is not necessary for a witness to lie or be coaxed by prosecutorial error to inaccurately state the facts — the mere fault of being human results in distorted memory and inaccurate testimony.<sup>78</sup>

Similarly, the authors of a British judicial report, following a medical inquiry, remind their readers that memory can be flawed, and that different witnesses' recollections can be "significantly at variance".<sup>79</sup> This is not, they note, because "one person is not 'telling the truth'" but because they "recognise that both may be telling 'their truth', which they are convinced is accurate, and are doing so in all sincerity". It is rare, they note, in any public inquiry for there only to be 'one truth'.

There are often a number of 'truths', all held with sincere conviction by those advancing them. This is particularly so, and particularly important to recognise, when looking back over a number of years to events which have since taken on an importance perhaps not recognised at the time.<sup>80</sup>

Dori Laub describes how one survivor of Auschwitz 'remembered' how four chimneys blew up during the Auschwitz uprising, when later historical evidence proved that only one chimney in fact exploded (1992:59). Laub quotes his own response at a conference, arguing that it could not be said that the woman's words were not credible because the facts later proved her to be wrong: "The woman was testifying [...] not to the number of the chimneys blown up, but to something else, more radical, more crucial: the reality of an unimaginable occurrence. [...] She

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<sup>78</sup> Talk given at Stanford University on 5 April 1999. *Stanford Journal of Legal Studies* :<http://agora.stanford.edu/sjls/images/pdf/engelhardt.pdf>. Accessed 10 February 2010.

<sup>79</sup> Introduction to the Inquiry into the Management of Care of Children Receiving Complex Heart Surgery at the Bristol Royal Infirmary, 2001. [http://www.bristol-inquiry.org.uk/final\\_report/report/sec1\\_chap\\_2\\_8.htm](http://www.bristol-inquiry.org.uk/final_report/report/sec1_chap_2_8.htm). Accessed 10 February 2010.

<sup>80</sup> Bristol Royal Infirmary Inquiry, paragraph 11.

testified to the breaking of a framework. That was historical truth.”  
(1992:60)

What Laub calls historical truth is only one of several ways in which the given facts may differ from that which is offered by a witness. There is also the problem of individual memory in a collective context. Yvette Hutchison comments on how personal memory can be changed when placed alongside other testimonies; knowing how a testimony will be used, for example, in an article or a play, can change the way it is told, which can, in turn, change its meaning. She describes the process of recalling memories in relation to South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission: “Both visual and narrative processes of remembering require participants to construct or reconstruct perception and experience, often through a creative form. They also include shifting from the personal code of meaning to a shared public ‘meaning’” (2005:355). Hutchison also makes the point that in the South African context there has been “no clear division between the real and fictional”:

In the African context, the story is itself important as a mode through which we can know ourselves and explore our history, identity and collective value systems. It is no less true for being fictional or constructed. At some level it may even suggest greater truth, abstracted beyond the specific. Thus whether or not what is presented is someone’s ‘actual’ words – that is, verbatim in a Western sense – is less important than whether they represent a recognisable, lived truth (2009:211).

If witness testimony is known to be an unreliable basis for establishing the factual basis of events, then it must be questioned why so many of those who write verbatim plays invest it with so much credence. Spoken testimonies in verbatim theatre are not only given considerable value, but

are often used to rebut other evidence. Kent makes it clear that for him testimony is adequate as source material without the need for additional verification:

I've never done plays that do that [require two or three sources in order to be certain that something was factual] because I'm always using what people have said. So the source is them. I've never yet done a play where I've made an allegation and it's me making the allegation. It's always other people making the allegation, whom I report accurately, who don't remain anonymous. So in *Guantanamo*, the fact Jamal al-Harith says, "We were tortured," I don't have to question that. He said that. So you can take it and believe it or disbelieve it. It's up to you as an audience to do that (Stoller, 2005).

The historical truth of a trauma victim may be unreliable in terms of the factual event, but s/he will generally be truthful in terms of his/her witness of the trauma. However, if the witness on whose testimony a verbatim play is based is proved to be unreliable, this, I would argue, changes the nature of the relationship between that witness and the audience.

In the published text of the British production of *The Exonerated*, Blank and Jensen note that the play is about six people (chosen from forty interviews, twenty of which were conducted in person), who "had been sentenced to death, spent anywhere from 2 to 22 years on death row and were subsequently found innocent and freed by the State" (2006:iii).<sup>81</sup> The New York Times review takes its lead from this statement with its title: "Someone Else Committed Their Crimes" (Brantley, 2002). This would appear to be a statement of fact, and I would argue that the

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<sup>81</sup> My numbering of un-numbered initial pages.

reception of the play depends on its accuracy.<sup>82</sup> Some commentators who support capital punishment have attacked the play for its title because the United States legal system does not include the term ‘exonerated’.<sup>83</sup> This is a matter of semantics, and if all those in the play who had been on death row had subsequently had their convictions overturned or reversed, then the point would not be worth considering. However, the assertion by Blank and Jensen that the people in the play, having been sentenced to death, were all “subsequently found innocent and freed by the State” is inaccurate.

Most of those whose stories are presented in the play have been found innocent and freed by the State. The case of Kerry Max Cook, for example, is held up as one of the worst cases in the United States of wrongful arrest and conviction.<sup>84</sup> The case of Sonia ‘Sunny’ Jacobs is not so clear. Jacobs was originally convicted, together with common law husband, Jesse Tafero, and his friend, Walter Rhodes, of murdering Philip Black, a Florida state trooper and Donald Irwin, a visiting Canadian constable in 1976. She was released from prison for time served after she accepted a plea bargain in which she pleaded guilty to second-degree murder. Carolyn McCann, Assistant State Attorney in Florida writes in detail of the case against Jacobs, pointing out a number of discrepancies between her version and the transcripts of the court and the witnesses to the shooting of two patrolmen.<sup>85</sup> Jacobs omits, for example, that witnesses and forensic evidence indicate that the first shots came from the car, where she was sitting with her son, or that after the

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<sup>82</sup> The wording is significantly different in the Introduction, where they state that the witnesses “had each been sentenced to die, spent anywhere from two to twenty-two years on death row, and had been freed amidst overwhelming evidence of their innocence” (2006:7).

<sup>83</sup> In particular, Joshua Marquis, district attorney of Clatsop County, in Astoria, Orego. <http://joshmarquis.blogspot.com/2005/03/myth-of-innocence.html>. Accessed 10 February 2010.

<sup>84</sup> See the letter by Kerry Max Cook in <http://www.prisonertalk.com/forums/showthread.php?t=106089>. Accessed 10 February 2010.

<sup>85</sup> Florida Commission on Capital Cases, 2002:45 [www.floridacapitalcases.state.fl.us/Publications/innocentsproject.pdf](http://www.floridacapitalcases.state.fl.us/Publications/innocentsproject.pdf). Accessed 10 February 2010.



shooting, she and her companions kidnapped an elderly man and his car, and with a pistol owned by Jacobs, tried to drive through a police roadblock. This evidence may be a fabrication, and Jacobs may be the innocent party, kidnapped and caught up in a nightmare as she suggests in the play (2006:38):

My trial came later. I thought, surely that [the death penalty her partner received] won't happen to *me*<sup>86</sup>. I mean, I was a hippie. I was a *vegetarian*! How could you possibly think I would kill someone? (2006:50)

The account of her interrogation is entirely based on her version of what she said, and hesitation is used to create a portrait of a confused young woman: "I'm sorry, I – I know, but I never had anything like this happen to me before. I just – I don't want to be blamed for something I had nothing to do with and I don't want them to take the kids away..." (2006:44). The audience are given the clear impression that Sunny is a mother caught up in events that are beyond her control and outside her frame of knowledge. Later in the play Jacobs describes the existence of a letter by Walter Rhodes which proved her innocence, and points out that it was written in November 1979, many years before she was released:

SUNNY: Keep in mind that I wasn't released until 1992. So I'll just give you a moment to reflect: from 1976 to 1992, just remove that entire chunk from your life, and that's what happened. (*Long pause, the length of a count of six*). (2006:69).

The pause reinforces the words of the text; the audience are directed to reflect as she indicates, on her words. Sunny forms an empathetic bond with the audience, which is intensified when she, herself, plays the part of Sunny.

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<sup>86</sup> Author's emphases.

However, Sunny's version of the arrest, as described in the plays does not tally with her actual previous record of arrests and convictions for drug and firearms offences.<sup>87</sup> Should this matter? It does not undermine the argument of the play, but I would argue that it may change the way in which the audience would process her testimony. The audience, I suggest, need to believe in the veracity of witness testimony, or the argument of the play is compromised. It does not make Sunny's description of Jesse's execution any less horrific, but does reduce the ability of the play to act as an instrument of persuasion.

Sunny's case raises important questions about the use of witness testimony and whether a play such as *The Exonerated* can fulfil its function as polemic if the audience loses faith in the witnesses. I would argue that while the play remains a compelling indictment of the United States judicial system, and is a moving play to hear, the anger that the play seeks to provoke depends on the audience's faith in the truth of the testimony.

The same argument can be made about *This is A True Story: a theatrical monologue from Death Row, USA* (Thomas Wright and Nicholas Harrington, 2001). This play tells the story of Howard Neal who has been on death row since 1982. According to Clive Stafford Smith, the legal director of Reprieve, which mounted the play, the only evidence linking Neal to the crimes was an alleged confession which was not recorded (Stafford Smith, 2007). At the time the play was written, Neal was fifty-three, with the mental age of an eight-year-old. These are verifiable facts. It may be also be true that Neal is innocent of the crimes of which he was found guilty and for which he remains on death row. Yet this cannot be stated as an objective truth in the same way as it can be proved that he has an IQ of 54 and suffers from what in the United States is termed

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<sup>87</sup> [www.floridacapitalcases.state.fl.us/Publications/innocentsproject.pdf](http://www.floridacapitalcases.state.fl.us/Publications/innocentsproject.pdf). Accessed 10 February 2010.

‘mental retardation’. However, to watch the play is to enter into Neal’s viewpoint, which includes an acceptance that he is innocent of the crimes and is, indeed, a victim of a serious miscarriage of justice. This is not evidential truth; the responses to the play of those living in the region where the murders took place show that for them the presentation of Neal as a victim is problematic. In their view he is a murderer, and they believe the victims to be the children who were killed and their families.<sup>88</sup> The play could therefore claim to portray a subjective truth, written as a polemic by a campaigning organisation.

The use of the extended silence and the hesitations in Sunny’s speech, show how Blank and Jensen wish to position the audience; their aim is similar to that of Holmes who wants to “implicate the audience viscerally in the action,” so that watching his play “is intrinsically a political act” (2007:144). That the audience are expected to act remains, however, the intention of those who write and produce verbatim plays. As Stanley Cohen says: “Wanting to do something is a universal human response” (2001:195). Some members of the audience may change their view of the world after seeing the play or at least adopt a new perspective. This is also the reason why many interviewees allow their lives to be used in verbatim plays. For Jean Pearson, *Trash* is a means to enable people to understand her anger; she wants the play to demonstrate her viewpoint in detailing her protracted relations with the various state bodies following her daughter’s death.

Des James, the father of Private Cheryl James who, in November 1995, became the second of four soldiers to die of gunshot wounds at Deepcut training barracks in Surrey, hopes that audiences watching *Deep Cut* will realise that there are many unanswered questions. He wants audiences to become part of the argument for a public inquiry, which will “find out

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<sup>88</sup> <http://www.newstatesman.com/human-rights/2007/03/howard-neal-death-mentally>. Accessed 10 February 2010.

what happened and put realistic corrective actions into place that will at least reduce as well as we are able any possibility of recurrence.” (Lovell, 2008) Philip Ralph notes in his introduction to his play that it is a beginning of a process:

It is not over for the families whose struggle for a public inquiry goes on; it should not be over for the press who, as Brian Cathcart puts it, have “dropped the ball”; it is not over for today’s recruits into the army, many of whom, we learn daily, face the same issues and problems as Sean, Cheryl, Geoff and James. And it should not be over for you, the reader or viewer of this play. (2008:23)

While the aspiration of playwrights that verbatim plays can bring about social change may feel idealistic, plays have been successful in helping to change public opinion. “Can theatre change immigration law?” asks Finn Kennedy, of his (partly) verbatim play about detention centres, *Unstated* (2008).<sup>89</sup> Kennedy admits that this is unlikely, but that one can begin the process of changing people’s views on asylum seekers. Kent is certain that public awareness of institutional racism in the Metropolitan Police Force was increased by the theatrical and television productions of *The Colour of Justice*: “I talked to people who said, having seen the play, their attitude had changed. If they saw a black person being stopped by the police they would ask why these people were being questioned, just to be a witness to what was going on” (Hammond & Steward, 2008:149).

In *The Exonerated*, too, idealism may be justified. Blank and Jensen acknowledge that they would never presume to take credit for triggering Governor Ryan’s decision to commute all the death sentences in Illinois,

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<http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/theatreblog/2008/jul/02/cantheatrechangeimmigration>. Accessed 10 February 2010.

although it was noted that the case of Kerry Max Cook was one that did influence his decision. They were told, however, by Governor Ryan and by others, that the play had made a difference. The attorney Larry Marshall from the Center on Wrongful Convictions told Amnesty International that, after the performance of *The Exonerated* in Chicago, and Governor Ryan's subsequent choice, he would, 'never again doubt the power of art to effect social change' (Blank and Jensen, 2005a:18).

Few plays will be as successful as this in creating political change, but others do stimulate action, as some responses on the iceandfire website (2007) make clear: "I have to make some space in my life to do something about that issue. I thought it was informative. I want to get hold of the information – statistics and things – I've got to get involved." Following the performance of *Motherland* (2008) in June 2008, audience members signed a card to mothers in detention, a statement to the Minister for Women in support of refugee women, and an online petition which urged the Minister to ensure that gender guidelines on assessing women's claims are fully implemented and that vulnerable women and children are not detained in the asylum process.

When plays are created to initiate action, whether it is the change of a point of view or something more tangible, it seems fair to state that the audience watching them assume that the testimony they hear can be authenticated. Yet in some cases, this faith may not be justified, and witnesses can be unreliable.

### 2.2.2 A Negotiated Reality: *Trash*

They've lied. They've lied through their teeth ...That thing...in London, that [name of probation officer] were ringing the doctor to apologise to the doctor for the trouble the doctor were having. With Kelly. She didn't ring us. She didn't ring me to say: "How were you going on?" She didn't ring Kelly to say: 'How were you going?' What kind of a system is that? What kind of a system is that? No, my daughter told me they'd set her up to die. And do you know something? I believe her. They had set her up.<sup>90</sup>

On Wednesday 10<sup>th</sup> November 1999, a young woman, Kelly Pearson, with a long history of drug and alcohol abuse, died of a drug overdose in Wardour Street in London's Soho. Her mother, Jean, was informed about her death some twenty-four hours later. This is the setting for the opening of *Trash*. Writing *Trash*, it was clear that some form of negotiation between fact and opinion had to be made. At the time of my interviews with her (2006-2008), Jean Pearson had spent between seven and nine years fighting the Government, as she saw it, to compel someone to accept responsibility for the death of her daughter. I met her in Trafalgar Square on Saturday 28 October 2006 at a rally for the "United Friends and Families Campaign", a protest about the deaths of those who had died while in the care of the state.<sup>91</sup>

Jean's history was more complicated than many others I heard that day. Her daughter had not self-harmed and died in prison (as had the daughters of many others I met), but had suffered mental illness; as Jean believed, as a consequence of the drug regime Kelly had been on in prison and then taken off on her release into Jean's care. Kelly's death

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<sup>90</sup> Jean Pearson, transcript of first interview, 15 November 2006.

<sup>91</sup> The phrase is used to justify an Article 2 Inquest under the 1988 Human Rights legislation and includes those who die in prison, hospital, or in police custody, or any place where the state has a duty of care.

followed an erroneous arrest, and Jean believes that it may have been caused in part by a delayed release which prevented her catching her bus back home and the refusal of a doctor to call an ambulance. Jean knew who she felt was responsible for her daughter's death. She had rehearsed her arguments through several tribunals, inquiries and an inquest, as well as a number of internal complaints procedures. Like Pauline Campbell in *Cuts*, she had repeated her complaints so many times over the years that what she said was forged by repetition. Indeed, her decision to collaborate with me on the play was so that her version of events would be placed on record. The creation of a different historical account, notes Carol Martin, may be an individual, personal history rather than a national narrative (2006:192).

My first interview with Jean at her home lasted five hours and produced over seventy pages of transcript. It was an angry and libellous polemic, and listening to it was not easy. Jean rarely stopped for breath, except to light another cigarette, and it would be hard for an audience to experience this litany of blame. After the interview, I was not sure how, or even whether, I could make it into a play. My second interview with Jean was specifically in order to ensure that if I did write a play about her, she would appear as a three-dimensional character. The meeting took place over a long lunch at a pub near her home and without a tape recorder. I came back from that meeting with one anecdote and a joke, but with a better understanding of who Jean was.

Verbatim plays embody, as Martin notes, "contradictions of fact and fiction, of truth and lies" (2009:84) What Jean was saying was true for her at that moment, but whether it had any objective truth was a very different question, and it was a question that I needed audiences to ask. It would have been possible to allow Jean to narrate the story of Kelly's death simply as a chronological list of events, but, listening to Jean, it

appeared that her own journey as a bereaved mother was as important as the story of Kelly's death. It was this story that I chose to write.

To write *Trash* required a careful negotiation of Jean's testimony. This is not to say that Jean utters deliberate falsehoods, but that Jean's 'historical truth', the version of events which she recounts and in which she believes may not tally with the 'factual truth' provided by other documentary evidence. Whereas some verbatim playwrights, as has been shown, trust the testimony of their witnesses and feel that it is not necessary to seek corroborative evidence, I did feel that it was necessary to check Jean's sources to establish the factual basis for her claims.

I am not alone in this: Slovo states that in writing *Guantanamo*, "there were other stories but I decided not to include anything I did not have evidence of,"<sup>92</sup> and Hare, who used a researcher as well as doing his own research to write *Stuff Happens*, observes that the events in the play "have been authenticated from multiple sources, both public and private. What happened happened. Nothing in the narrative is knowingly untrue. Scenes of direct address quote people verbatim" (2004:vi). It should be noted, parenthetically, that the verbatim sections of *Stuff Happens* are combined with Hare's fictional reconstructions of private conversations between the politicians: "When the doors close on the world's leaders and their entourages, then I have used my imagination" (2004:vi<sup>93</sup>).

To check Jean's story, however, I did not interview the other people involved, as I knew that I would find different stories and perspectives, and while this would have been interesting, I did not feel that it would assist in the writing of the play. In confronting Jean with contradictory stories, I would almost certainly change her relationship with me from a witness to an antagonist. I was also aware that any such action on my part

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<sup>92</sup> Symposium on Verbatim Theatre Practices in Contemporary Theatre, 13 July 2006.

<sup>93</sup> My numbering of unnumbered preliminary pages.



could result in Jean's withdrawal from the project. However, I was not searching for a historical truth in writing this play: I wanted to portray the truth from Jean's point of view. Her personal isolation and the refusal of others to agree with her theories regarding the death of her daughter are a part of her story.

I was also interested in the language Jean had acquired to tell her story. It was clear that she had gradually assimilated much of the legal and medical language that she was encountering and this had entered into her discourse. The documentation I received from Jean included almost two hundred pages of letters, reports and newspaper clippings. There were letters from Kelly from prison, Kelly's prison medical files, the report by the prison ombudsman, the police records, the recorded conversation of Jean and the doctor she took to a tribunal, and press interviews with Jean.

After I had finished the first draft of the play, she sent me the transcript of Kelly's inquest. Reading this that I discovered just how far removed Jean's version of events was from other versions. For example, Jean's insistence that her daughter had not died of an overdose was based on her belief that Kelly had had only ingested "a tiny sip of methadone, probably in a friend's beer".<sup>94</sup> Jean's belief was based on her understanding that Kelly had drunk 0.9 milligrams of methadone. However, the pathologist's report found 0.9 milligrams of methadone *per litre of blood*.<sup>95</sup> This is considerably more, a fatal amount, particularly for someone like Kelly who had not recently been taking methadone or heroin.

I did not include this information in the play for several reasons, the most important (to me) being that it risked demeaning Jean and I did not want

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<sup>94</sup> Jean Pearson, transcript of first interview, 15 November 2006

<sup>95</sup> My italics.

the play to do that.<sup>96</sup> I wanted to honour her right to her own opinions and her battles, as she saw her relations with the authorities, to expose the truth behind her daughter's death. At the same time, I wanted to allow the audience enough space to negotiate their own path between facts and Jean's interpretation of facts, and make their own assessment about her. Jean had had to fight for information about Kelly's death, which she received in piecemeal form. For several years, using an old copy of Black's Medical Dictionary, she had tried to discover the facts for herself. No-one, she told me, had previously sat down with her and explained to her about the overdose.<sup>97</sup>

It was in the problems facing Jean that I found the play. The reasons for Kelly's death would still constitute much of the dialogue, but the play itself would be about Jean. It would show how a woman was changed by this form of trauma and allow Jean's voice to be heard in that context. I had to recreate Jean as a character, so that the audience would be able to empathise with her battles with the various official bodies and understand the complexity of her personality including, as I have noted here, how she views her relations with officialdom as a continuing fight. Jean's personality is part of the unfolding of the action.

In embracing the unreliability of Jean's testimony, I found that the play could become more nuanced, it could do more than simply deliver a simple autobiographical narrative. One model for *Trash* was Doug Wright's *I Am My Own Wife*, which interrogates both the notion of documentary and the truth of testimony. Wright chose not only to write his play about Charlotte von Mahlsdorf and his/her world, but also an

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<sup>96</sup> My journal records that I debated whether I could use it, knowing that it was inaccurate, or hedge it around with subsequent retractions. I did, however, explain the differences to Jean.

<sup>97</sup> However, I do not think that she trusts my version of the dosage, since she has believed for so long that her daughter did not drink a large quantity of methadone.

enquiry into the nature of truth within a biographical drama.<sup>98</sup> His play is created from witness testimony but also questions its veracity.

*I Am My Own Wife* presents the audience with information about the life of Charlotte von Mahlsdorf, but leaves the audience free to make up their mind about Charlotte. In so doing, it creates an ambiguous rendering of the complexities of narrative veracity. The dilemma of the playwright is staged as a counterpoint to the narration of Charlotte himself/herself, as when the journalist John Marks writes to the playwright about Charlotte's story of his/her relationship with the antique dealer Alfred Kirschner (2004:62), questioning the veracity of the story:

“It’s like some Cold War thriller written by Armistead Maupin. Trouble is, it doesn’t scan with the facts in her file.” Doug subsequently agrees that the information is dubious: “We can’t go looking to the Stasi file for facts. Those agents had quotas to fill, supervisors to impress. Reports were doctored all the time! One entry contradicts the next.” (2004: 62, 63)<sup>99</sup>

Where *Trash* and *I am My Own Wife* differ from many other verbatim plays is that they do not have a melioristic function, and thus they allow the audience to examine their truth claims more freely; they acknowledge the unreliability of the witness and employ it to question the nature of testimony. By the end of *Trash*, the audience may question Jean’s version of the facts of her daughter’s death, but they will not deny her the right to believe in her own version. The doubt she raises about how we can ever know the truth about events becomes a universal question. Jean, I hope, will join Charlotte von Mahlsdorf in demonstrating that “multiple

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<sup>98</sup> Charlotte von Mahlsdorf, born Lothar Berfelde, was an East German transvestite. See also Saviana Stanescu’s interview with Doug Wright. *The Drama Review* 50.3 (Fall) 2006 pp. 100-107, and Highberg, 2009:167-178.

<sup>99</sup> All the characters in the play including the playwright and Charlotte are played by one actor.

perspectives shape the narratives that emerge from any historical event and show the range of interpretations and discourses that surround it” (Highberg, 2009:168).

### 2.3 Acts of Representation: *My Name is Rachel Corrie, Cruising* and *The Girlfriend Experience*

*One government official was overheard asking his mother after watching and listening to himself portrayed by an actor in Half the Picture, 'Wasn't I good?'*

– Norton-Taylor in Hammond & Steward, 2008:128

In *The Laramie Project*, one of the interviewees, Zubaida Ula, ponders on the ontological incongruity of being interviewed and then having her words spoken on stage by an actor: “And then I was picturing like you’re gonna be in a play about my town. You’re gonna be on stage in New York and you’re gonna be acting like you’re us. That’s so weird” (Kaufman, 2001: 26). The tension between the telling of the story and the reaction of the person whose story it is, demonstrates one of the inherent problems of verbatim theatre. The issues arise from the division between the person whose testimony is used and a character, a fictional construct who appears on stage, based on that original person. The two are never the same, even, I would suggest, when the original person plays him/herself, since the crafted script forms a layer of representation. The response of the audience may appear to be to the person whose testimony is being spoken, but it is always a response to a character on a stage.

In crafting the two plays in this study, I was always aware of this dissonance: Jean in *Trash* is not the Jean Pearson I interviewed; the Blanksby family are both themselves and my fictive constructs of them. The character of Jean exists to carry an argument; while she has the same speech patterns as her original, and uses her words, she is also my fictive construct. It would be possible to recognize the original from an encounter with the character, but they are not the same. The longer I spent crafting the plays, editing the text and cutting any speech that did

not carry the argument I was making, the more I became aware of the division between the person and character of Jean. The moment an actor takes the role of Jean and embodies her on stage, a further layer of representation will be added. This layer of impersonation underlines the fact that verbatim theatre, however much it may strive for authenticity, is always the manifestation of a performance.

In this section I explore some of the issues of representation via case studies of two plays, *My Name Is Rachel Corrie* and *Cruising* and raise questions as to whether the reception of these plays is based on a perception of the person or of the character.

### 2.3.1 The Making of a Myth: *My Name is Rachel Corrie*

I have chosen to use the play *My Name Is Rachel Corrie* to explore issues of representation because the story of Rachel Corrie, and the narrative formed by the creation of the play about her, demonstrate the problem that arises when the perception of a character is mediated by a prior perception of the person, formed from other sources.

To write a play based on real people is to become aware of a number of subtle differences. In terms of the people themselves, these are internal and external perceptions: how they see themselves and how they are seen by others. In terms of the character portrayed on stage, there is the additional perception of:

- the writer
- the actor and director
- the audience, in terms of the character as portrayed, that is to say how the character appears on stage and the empathetic bond forged between the audience and the character

- the audience, in terms how they view the portrayal of a person, that is to say the success or failure of the impersonation. The perception of an accurate impersonation of known personality can, as Megson notes, can generate a “scintillating theatrical frisson” (2005:371). In *The Observer*, Susannah Clapp praises Diane Fletcher’s “blazingly accurate Clare Short” in *Called to Account* (2007) and Michael Sheen’s portrayals of Tony Blair and David Frost are acclaimed precisely for accuracy of impersonation.<sup>100</sup>
- the audience, in terms of their opinion of the original person, which may change through what they witness on stage.

That each of the above may be different may not be problematic, in that it can produce a rich and layered interpretation of a character, but it may lead to problems when there is a clash between these individual perceptions.

Rachel Corrie was born in 1979 in Washington State, in the United States, and while attending college, took a year off from her studies to work as a volunteer in the Washington State Conservation Corps. She became a member of the International Solidarity Movement (ISM), an organisation which describes itself as a “movement committed to resisting the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land using nonviolent, direct-action methods and principles.”<sup>101</sup> Corrie travelled on behalf of the ISM to Gaza, where she was killed in March 2003, when attempting to stop a bulldozer operated by Israeli Defence Forces. The account of her death remains a matter of dispute: ISM eyewitnesses testify that the bulldozer drove deliberately at Corrie; the Israeli position is that her death was an accident.

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<sup>100</sup> In the TV drama, *The Deal* (2003), the film *The Queen*, (2006) and the play (and subsequent film), *Frost/Nixon* (2006).

<sup>101</sup> <http://palsolidarity.org/>. Accessed 10 February 2010.

The first half of *My Name Is Rachel Corrie* takes place in Rachel's bedroom at home before she leaves for Gaza, and uses her diaries to construct a portrait of her emotional development from child to teenager. Corrie recalls how as a fifth-grader, when other children wanted to be a doctor, astronaut or Spider-Man when they grew up, she wrote "a five-paragraph manifesto on the million things I wanted to be, from wandering poet to first woman president." (Rickman and Viner, 2005:7)<sup>102</sup>

This half of the play reveals her development not only as a person, and an idealist, but also her ambition to become a writer. She writes of the day she decided that she had to be an artist and a writer: "... and I didn't give a shit if I was mediocre and I didn't give a shit if I starved to death and I didn't give a shit if my whole damn high school turned and pointed and laughed in my face. I was finally awake, forever and ever" (2005:9). Her diaries are those of a teenager with literary aspirations:

I could write a history of my family according to discoveries I've made over the years in cupboards and drawers. Unfinished baby books. Duplicate containers of oregano from houses I lived in and moved out of, taking the seasoning with me. Placemats that defeated Cranberry juice and Oyster Stew and candle wax. (2005:16)

The play is structured so that the audience become the recipients of shared confidences; the language of the diary is both personal and artificial, the writing of a teenager who imagines that these words will be read as her juvenilia when she becomes a famous writer. She talks about her relationship with her boyfriend and her parents. Yet she is also developing a political awareness that is fostered by a trip to Russia while

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<sup>102</sup> All future citations from the play in this section are date and page number only.



she is still at school, and in her volunteer work. Just how idealistic she was from an early age is demonstrated in the play's epilogue, which is a speech in which the ten-year-old Corrie addresses the Fifth Grade Press Conference on World Hunger and dreams of helping the poor and bringing an end to world hunger (2005:52).<sup>103</sup>

There are very few references to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict in the first part of the play, although there is one answer phone message to her mother, which again demonstrates her concern for language:

I think it was smart that you're wary of using the word 'terrorism' and if you talk about the cycle of violence, or 'an eye for an eye', you could be perpetuating the idea that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a balanced conflict, instead of a largely unarmed people against the fourth most powerful military in the world. (2005:15)

The second half of the play takes place in Gaza and reflects Corrie's personal reaction to life in the Palestinian territory. The play also changes in terms of the quality and style of its writing. The first half of the play is predominantly based on diary extracts that have the self-consciousness of the young teenager with literary ambitions and is writing for a potential future audience. As such, they deliver a portrait of Corrie as 'every girl', there is little which makes her stand out; even her literary ability is not exceptional. The second half of the play is taken predominantly from Corrie's emails to her parents. The tone is direct and she is much more self-aware, conscious of her own limited understanding of politics: "I'm really new to talking about Israel-Palestine, so I don't always know the political implications of my words" (2005:25-26). She reacts warmly to the hospitality of the Palestinian family with whom she stays and is

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<sup>103</sup> In production, the video of Corrie herself making this speech was shown on screens.

outraged by the restrictions and fears they face: “You just can’t imagine it unless you see it. [...] I’m just beginning to learn from what I expect to be a very intense tutelage in the ability of people to organize against all odds, and to resist against all odds” (2005:34). The play ends with the announcement of her death.

*My Name Is Rachel Corrie* was created exclusively (with the exception of two brief video clips at the end of the play) from Corrie’s diaries and emails. Alan Rickman, who co-wrote the play with Katherine Viner, notes, “The important thing was to let Rachel Corrie speak for herself. We could have included other voices but we chose not to. We decided that with the exception of the short description of her death that we would simply allow her words to tell her story”.<sup>104</sup> Viner agrees: “In developing this piece of theatre, we wanted to uncover the young woman behind the political symbol, beyond her death. [...] We wanted to present a balanced portrait.”(2005).

The play has had a varied history: it was well received by the majority of critics in Britain<sup>105</sup>, but was cancelled in New York, Florida and Toronto prior to its opening.<sup>106</sup> I would argue that the reason for this cancellation is because of a divergence between the internal and external perceptions of Corrie. The image that the play presents is the perception of Rachel that she has of herself. This is not the same as the image that others have of her, or the image that has been created since her death, as Viner observes: “many Israelis considered her at best naïve, interfering in a situation she didn’t understand. And to some Americans she was a

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<sup>104</sup> Personal interview, 15 October 2005.

<sup>105</sup> See [http://www.royalcourttheatre.com/whatson\\_reviews.asp?play=401](http://www.royalcourttheatre.com/whatson_reviews.asp?play=401). Accessed 10 February 2010.

<sup>106</sup> It has subsequently been staged in New York, off-Broadway, in Vancouver, and many other cities in the United States and Canada. A comprehensive list of productions can be found at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:My\\_Name\\_Is\\_Rachel\\_Corrie](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:My_Name_Is_Rachel_Corrie). Accessed 10 February 2010.

traitor; websites blared that she should burn in hell for an eternity” (2005).

The debate about whether the play should or should not be performed in New York (and in the other cities where it was cancelled), was based, in my view, not on the content of the play, which many of those who campaigned against it had not read or seen, but on how Rachel Corrie as a person was viewed by the Jewish community. The argument centred on the person of Corrie and the right to create a play about her. Ari Roth, the artistic director of Theatre J in Washington, writes:

The creation of the dramatic protagonist, Rachel Corrie, is an unconscious, or very deliberate hijacking of the symbol of Anne Frank as icon of indiscriminate violence and victimization. Its emotional effectiveness serves to shove the icon of Anne Frank off the stage and replace it with a newly minted edition of our millennium’s new martyr. *Shalom*, Anne Frank and *Ahlan*, Rachel Corrie. (cited in Martin, 2006:13 and 2009:77-78)

It would seem that the representation of Corrie had itself become enmeshed in the politics which led to her death. The argument appeared to be: Corrie is well regarded by Palestinians and those who support their cause; thus any play which reveals Corrie from her own perspective should not be written. Martin claims that the play “turned personal correspondence into a political manifesto” and focuses on Corrie and “not on ways to improve our understanding of the situation in Israel-Palestine and from this understanding help to create progressive change” (2009:78). Yet I would argue that *My Name Is Rachel Corrie* is not a play about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Viner quotes an Israeli couple, members of the rightwing Likud party, who saw the British production and felt that the criticism had been misplaced because the play “wasn’t against Israel, it was against violence” (2006).

My own impression from seeing the London production<sup>107</sup> was that it celebrated a life, and that Corrie might just as easily have died working with refugees in Sudan or any other conflict zone. To me, this was specifically *not* a political play, it was a play which revealed a life that had been ended because of a young girl's idealistic foray into a world of politics and war, and this was how some critics also responded to the play.<sup>108</sup> Ben Brantley, in the New York Times, was reminded of the letters from Julian Bell, Virginia Woolf's nephew, who was killed in the Spanish Civil War, and stated that for him this was "not an animated recruiting poster for Palestinian activists. Its deeper fascination lies in its invigoratingly detailed portrait of a passionate political idealist in search of a constructive outlet" (2006).

Viner echoes this view when she records the reaction of a number of American students who were "thrilled" at the image of themselves on stage and of a person "they might, in a different life, have become" (2006). There appear to be two different perceptions: that of Corrie as presented in the play from her own point of view, and that of Corrie as viewed by the external world. Efforts to ban the play, it would seem, are based on this latter perception.<sup>109</sup> One board member of the theatre in Toronto who forced the cancellation of the play had not read or seen it, but believed that it "would provoke a negative reaction in the Jewish community." The principal donor told the theatre that she would "react

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<sup>107</sup> Royal Court Theatre, 15 October 2005.

<sup>108</sup> Georgina Brown (2005) saw it as "a play about the nature of heroism, while Charles Spencer (2005) left the theatre mourning not only Corrie's death but "one's own loss of the idealism and reckless courage of youth".

<sup>109</sup> "The director of the New York theatre told the New York Times yesterday that it wasn't the people who actually saw the play he was concerned about. 'I don't think we were worried about the audience,' he said. 'I think we were more worried that those who had never encountered her writing never encountered the piece, would be using this as an opportunity to position their arguments.' Since when did theatre come to be about those who don't go to see it? If the play itself, as Mr Nicola clearly concedes, is not the problem, then isn't the answer to get people in to watch it, rather than exercising prior censorship?" (Viner, 2006).

very badly to a play that was offensive to Jews” (Richard Ouzounian, 2006).

Corrie herself and Corrie as presented on stage, however, are not the same. While the play is created from Corrie’s own writing, it is an edited version and certainly slanted in a way that is acceptable to her family. Martin is correct in saying that much has been edited out (2009:77). But the perception of Rachel Corrie on stage is also bound up with the able performance of the actor Megan Dodds. Holmes points out that in crafting a verbatim play authenticity must be reconciled with theatricality. “The process is of course flawed: as soon as you remove testimony from its human source and substitute an actor’s voice, authenticity is compromised” (2007:141).

The persona of the actor is inevitably bound up with the character s/he is portraying. When Michael Billington writes, “In the course of 90 minutes you feel you have not just had a night at the theatre: you have encountered an extraordinary woman” (2005a), he is celebrating the work of Dodds; he did not meet Corrie. His reaction is to a skilfully achieved representation. Billington is not alone among drama critics in reacting to the representation as if to the individual: Brantley, reviewing a staged reading of *The Exonerated* in The New York Times, declares that “Though Mr. Dreyfuss is a famously flashy performer, he delivers Mr. Cook’s observations without dramatic flourishes. The actor, for the moment, has vanished” (2002).

Philip Auslander alleges that “Even in the most conventionally mimetic forms of modern Western theatre, the actor’s body never fully becomes the character’s body” (1997:90). However, it is also true that the physical presence of the actor, who creates the character on stage, can dominate the image of the original person they are attempting to recreate. Reinelt

describes this double perception of the actor and the impersonated in her analysis of Vanessa Redgrave playing Joan Didion, in the latter's autobiographical play (*The Year of Magical Thinking*, 2007):

Redgrave is nothing at all like Didion: tall, large-boned while Didion is very slight, I find myself thinking of Redgrave as a sympathetic stand-in. Redgrave is a technology for Didion; an appropriate embodiment for a task best carried out by someone with the same highly developed skills of style and presentation on stage that Didion displays on the page. (Reinelt, 2009:22)

The success of *My Name Is Rachel Corrie* is due to the skills of editing, direction and acting, as well as in the quality of Corrie's own personality, which, together, form a character to whom the audience respond warmly. Whether such a representation has the right to be made against the background of a political conflict would seem to be the issue that provokes so much controversy.

### 2.3.2 "Kindof very true": *Cruising* and *The Girlfriend Experience*

Alecky Blythe initiated her personal form of verbatim theatre after attending a workshop by Mark Wing-Davey in the techniques of reproduction of actual speech as developed by Anna Deveare Smith. Thus Blythe's approach to her plays begins at the point of presentation; she records people in order to reproduce their voices precisely on stage. The name of her company, Recorded Delivery, makes this clear, these plays are as much about the method of their representation on the stage as about the text that is being reproduced. For Blythe, the emphasis is on exact reproduction: the actors on stage are not allowed to learn their parts, but at each performance repeat the precise words of the original interviewee from earpieces, via mini-disc. In the prologue of *The*

*Girlfriend Experience*, when Blythe, placing herself as an offstage voice, demonstrates her methodology to two of the prostitutes who are the subject of the play, she stresses its claim to provide an authentic representation:

ALECKY (*voice-over*). Um (*Beat.*) – I, um (*Beat.*) – I kindof [sic] make. (*Beat.*) – um (*Beat.*) – they’re sortof [sic] documentary plays. (*Pause.*) But – I don’t – *film* anything (*Beat.*) – I just *record*<sup>110</sup> – hours and hours of-of – audio. (*Pause.*) Um (*Beat.* – and I edit it (*Beat.*) – and then, um (*Beat.*) –those (*Beat.*) – so (*Beat.*) – people’s *real* words your real words – then become the words that the actors speak in the play – and they, they – *hear* – your voice – speaking – through earphones – and then they *copy* exactly your intonation, accent – I’ll describe – y’know – one was *sat* here, one was sat here, and whatever.

POPPY. Yeah.

ALECKY (*voice-over*). And it’s – it’s a really weird, kindof very true - obviously *so* so true to *life*, kindof thing –

TESSA. So you ’ave to be careful what you *say* –

*They laugh.* (2008:5)<sup>111</sup>

The tension between reality and representation, between the real and the constructed, lies at the heart of all factually-based productions, whether they are staged, written or filmed, or a combination of these. John Grierson’s description of documentary as “the creative interpretation of

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<sup>110</sup> Blythe’s emphases.

<sup>111</sup> The references to *Cruising* (2006) and *The Girlfriend Experience* (2008) in this section are cited by date and page number only.

actuality” (1966:13) is often cited to demonstrate this tension.<sup>112</sup> The technique employed by Recorded Delivery, Blythe asserts, is necessary since it is “an actor’s instinct to perform: to heighten, to try to make their lines ‘more interesting’ in an effort to project their character and make the person they are playing real”. It is the reproduction of actual speech, she claims, which gives her plays “the ring of truth” (Hammond & Steward, 2008:81-82). This section will examine to what extent Blythe’s reproduced reality plays are “kindof very true”, and how much they may be, in fact, fictional artefacts.

It would appear that the truth that Blythe seeks in her stringent rules of reproduction of original voices is that of verisimilitude; the actors’ voices in the play endeavour to copy those of the original speakers. Yet such an attempt at similarity does not include casting. The production of *Cruising*, a story that Blythe describes as “pensioners in search of passion” (2006:4) employed four actors, all of whom were in their thirties, or younger, to play the roles of the pensioners, whose ages ranged from sixties to late eighties.<sup>113</sup> This may have been the decision of the director, Matthew Dunster, as it may have been the decision of the director of *The Girlfriend Experience*<sup>114</sup>, Joe Hill-Gibbins, to cast young actresses to play women in this play, whose actual ages range from thirty-five to fifty-eight. However, the similarity of presentation of the two productions does tend to suggest that Blythe may have had some influence regarding the nature of the casting. Another anomaly in the casting of *The Girlfriend Experience* relates to the size of the protagonist, Tessa. In the text, she describes herself as a “curvy dress size fourteen” (2008:13); however, the actress who played her was clearly closer to a

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<sup>112</sup> Cited by Forsyth Hardy in Grierson, 1966:13, this phrase is often misquoted or rephrased. Moreover, there is no documentary evidence that Grierson ever used it. See Andrew Higson (1986) “Britain’s Outstanding Contribution to Film: The Documentary Realist Tradition,” ed. Charles Barr, *All Our Yesterdays*, London: BFI, pp. 72-97.

<sup>113</sup> Bush Theatre, June 2006.

<sup>114</sup> Royal Court Theatre, September 2008



size twenty-four, and the audience, therefore, found the line funny, while one critic assumed it was another form of euphemism, similar to that of the title: “curvy means obese” (Gardner, 2009).

Thus, if verisimilitude is the intention of these plays, it is undermined by the form of its representation; the actors do not in any way resemble the original people whose voices are heard in these plays. If the aim, however, is not that to create a realistic portrait of the elderly couples or the Bournemouth prostitutes who are the protagonists of the plays, then what form of representation do Blythe’s plays offer the audience? The careful recording of speech aims to allow the audience a chance to eavesdrop on actual conversations, similar to a ‘fly-on-the-wall’ television documentary. The dialogue in these plays differs from that formed from interviews and primary texts, which Blythe deliberately avoids since she believes it can lead “to a certain self-consciousness in the characters” (2006:4).

Yet while in documentaries the camera reproduces place, visual appearance and action in addition to dialogue, Blythe’s plays reproduce dialogue removed from context, and given a different twist through the discrepancies in the casting. Additionally, the mise-en-scène of these plays is not naturalistic. In the production of *The Girlfriend Experience*, for example, the cosy-middle class domesticity of the ‘parlour’, the euphemism employed by the women for their brothel, is not reproduced on stage. While the characters discuss the new décor “she’s done all this, done the decorating, got all the furniture in [...] it’s just so welcoming (*Beat*) – it’s lovely” (2008:6-7), the stage is virtually bare, except for two shabby sofas.

Realism would not appear to be the intention of these plays. In the prologue of *The Girlfriend Experience*, for example, it is clear that

Blythe would have originally been in the room with the two women, Tessa and Poppy; recreating this as a voice-over results in a somewhat strange encounter in that the women are reacting to a sound, not a person. The audience themselves later take the role of the questioner, a role that is continued when the characters address questions that would have been to Blythe directly to the audience:

*A phone rings*

TESSA (*to audience*) If anybody asks, you're the lady who does the phones, okay? (2008:7)

Documentaries, as Bill Nichols acknowledges, in relation to film, have always been “forms of re-presentation, never clear windows onto ‘reality’” (2005:18). What Nichols says about the documentary filmmaker is equally valid for the verbatim playwright, that he or she is “an active fabricator of meaning” and a producer of “discourse rather than a neutral or all-knowing reporter of the ways things truly are” (2005:18). In Blythe’s plays, the representation of the protagonists is altered; new meanings are suggested from their discourse.

The process of creating a verbatim play where many hours of text are edited down (in the case of *The Girlfriend Experience*, one hundred hours were cut to ninety minutes of stage time) leads to a partial, and sometimes misleading, representation of the protagonists. The Guardian critic, Gardner, reviewing *The Girlfriend Experience*, queries “Whose life is it? Whose play?” (2009) and these are key questions, not simply about Blythe’s plays, but about many examples of verbatim theatre, when the playwright has a different agenda from that of the people whose words are used to form the plays. As Blythe notes: “I did not set out to make a biographical documentary, but a piece of drama which has been

edited and therefore warped in some way for dramatic purposes” (2006:5).

The ‘warping’ of the original discourse might be said to come from the personal agenda of the playwright in creating the play. For example, interviewing the main protagonist of *Cruising*, Maureen, Blythe found it “extraordinary” that her attitude towards relationships was similar to that of a young woman: “She spoke about her broken heart as if she were a love-struck teenager not a worldly widow of seventy-two with two married children” (2006:4). It could be said that this personal expectation of behaviour dictates the tone of the play. Maureen and the other characters do not behave as Blythe expects; therefore their search for love is seen to be strange and amusing. The success of *Cruising* and *The Girlfriend Experience* indicates, indeed, that many audiences share Blythe’s view, although this may depend on the age of the spectator. As a member of the audience at the Bush Theatre during a matinee of *Cruising*,<sup>115</sup> when the age of the audience mirrored that of the characters, I observed that there were few laughs, but when a scene from this play was shown at the 2006 Verbatim Symposium<sup>116</sup>, the generally younger delegates found it very funny. My journal records that I did not find the play amusing: “I dislike the way we are meant to laugh at these people and not with them”.<sup>117</sup> The critic Michael Billington found the milieu depicted in *The Girlfriend Experience* sad, “unlike the rest of the audience who seemed to find the notion of an old man with prostate trouble needing sexual assistance hilarious” (2008).

In Blythe’s plays it would seem that a segment of the lives of the protagonists is recreated as a demonstration of how the playwright views their lives and behaviour. The aim, here, is comedy, but other

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<sup>115</sup> 17 June 2006.

<sup>116</sup> 14 July 2006.

<sup>117</sup> 17 June 2006.

playwrights also can be seen to take a specific aspect of a person's life as if it represented the whole person. Hare, for example, uses the words of the interviewees of *The Permanent Way* to make political points. Although it was hearing the story of some of the families bereaved by the Hatfield train crash<sup>118</sup> which gave Hare the idea of how he should write the play (Hammond & Steward, 2008:57), one of the mothers was unhappy with the manner in which she was portrayed. Bella Merlin, an actor/researcher on the play, notes:

In a similar way to which he had no desire to show John Prescott's personal side, [Hare] sought here to highlight the Second Bereaved Mother's emotional, angry side, in order to juxtapose the cold-hearted facts and figures surrounding the railway industry with the flesh-and-blood pain and dishonour surrounding the disasters. In other words, he had no desire to show her temperate side: he had other characters to demonstrate temperance at other places in the play. (2007:132)

Merlin herself, however, in her essay on the play, always refers to the woman by her stage character name, Second Bereaved Mother. It could be argued, therefore, that taking away her real name and creating a character who will enact the victim role designed for her in this play also diminishes the person.<sup>119</sup>

While there is a visual disconnect between the actual lives of the protagonists taped by Blythe and their stage reproduction, *The Girlfriend Experience* does demonstrate a certain form of veracity in its representation of the prostitutes. However, I am not so convinced by *Cruising* which, I feel, deliberately manufactures its drama from the

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<sup>118</sup> 17 October 2000.

<sup>119</sup> See also Merlin's article on developing her role: "*The Permanent Way* and The Impermanent Muse". *Contemporary Theatre Review*. 17,1, 2007, pp. 41-49.

selection of extreme moments which do not necessarily provide a true picture of the interviewees. Blythe admits to this selectivity in her introduction to the play: “Maureen is left at the end of the play still broken-hearted [...] Although this is undoubtedly how she would like to be remembered, it would not make for such a poignant ending” (2006:5).

Blythe’s intention in writing *The Girlfriend Experience*, is to show that not all prostitutes are drug addicts or controlled by pimps and that these women “take pride in their work and the parlour” (Hammond & Steward, 2008:83). “This is a business,” says Tessa (2008:12). The play appears to offer an authentic glimpse into the humdrum yet bizarre world of a Bournemouth brothel. When the women are occupied with clients, for example, they place a garden gnome on the doorstep, although in the original text, and presumably in the original transcript, this was a box of Daz (2008:14). Conversations can begin with a discussion on biscuits and end with a description of a client’s coprophiliac preferences. The play itself presents different facets of the prostitutes’ lives. There is the central character, the middle-aged Tessa, who projects a somewhat cosy image. She describes a married couple who are clients who come to chat and have a bottle of wine and then “do what we need to do” and then chat again (2008:10). This homely picture contrasts strongly with the description of life as a prostitute given by the damaged, and self-harming, younger woman Poppy, who is seen drinking three litres of cider and water so that she can provide adequate watersports for a client.

Towards the end of the play, Tessa comments that she is not sure that she wants to see the play about her life because she does not like herself or the way she talks, but that it would be worth “going through the cringe-factor” in order to demonstrate that being a prostitute is a job and one

that she is good at. She wants the audience to know that “we *are* real” (2008:69).<sup>120</sup>

Verbatim theatre, at its best, allows the people on whom the plays are based freedom of expression. It is their views which are represented on stage and these voices may often belong, as with *The Girlfriend Experience*, to those who have few other means of expression, those whom Studs Terkel often called the “uncelebrated” people whose lives should, nonetheless, be celebrated.

In an article on the American staging of *Guantanamo*, Nina Metz comments that: “We, as a culture, put a lot of stock in the truth, which has increasingly become ‘the truth’” (2006). Verbatim theatre is a genre that validates itself on the basis of its authenticity; it narrates version of events through representations of factual experience and derives its authority from its seemingly close engagement with those facts. Yet, as this chapter shows, its relationship with reality and the truth may not be as solid as some audiences perceive or wish it to be. In the prologue to *Enron* (Lucy Prebble, 2009), a fictional recreation of the events that caused the collapse of the American energy company, a lawyer tells the audience that the story they are about to hear is not exactly what happened. “But we’re going to put it together and sell it to you as the truth” (Prebble, 2009:3). Verbatim plays may be sold as the truth and much of what they describe may be factually accurate, but the plays themselves are partial representations. Drama requires a narrative; as Holmes notes: “life rarely has closure, whereas drama usually does (2007:141). In verbatim theatre what may seem to be ‘the truth’ is more often ‘a truth’; what may appear to be authentic is not reality, but a crafted simulacrum of the real.

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<sup>120</sup> Blythe’s italics.

## 3

## Ethical and Legal Issues in the Creation of Verbatim Theatre

*A lot of people said to me: “Oh, you should try and be balanced and tell both sides of the story,” but I thought, “Nah, what for? Let’s just tell it from the family’s perspective.*

– Tanika Gupta, 2008:263

Verbatim theatre is a genre which prides itself on its literalist interpretation of factual evidence and testimony and, as this study has shown, in some cases, can hold itself to be a more reliable authority on events and issues than those of the state or the media. Its relationship with its source material, therefore, how it is researched and edited, and the accuracy of its content should be transparent and withstand scrutiny. Yet, the tensions between the reportage, the aim of revealing the ‘truth’ of an event, and the creation of work of theatre, which run through the conception of verbatim plays like a fault line, are demonstrated precisely in the ethical issues.

These issues arise even before a word of the play has been written, and many of them relate to the construction of the point of view of the writer/s. This may not be the same, as has been previously noted, as the point of view of those who provide the testimony. Such issues are not new; they have been debated at length in relation to documentary film and the non-fiction novel. Truman Capote observes of writing *In Cold Blood* (1966), that he retains his point of view through the selection of what he chooses to tell, and that it has to be his singular point of view:

I had to make up my mind, and move towards that one view, always. You can say that the reportage is incomplete. But then it has to be. It's a question of selection, you wouldn't get anywhere if it wasn't for that. (in George Plimpton, 1998:203).<sup>121</sup>

Issues surface as to whose truth is being portrayed in the play, whose point of view is told, and the right to adapt, alter and edit primary source material in order to make the play dramatically more interesting. Additionally, there are ethical issues regarding confidentiality and anonymity.

This chapter will consider these issues and examine existing guidelines and codes of practice. It will also consider significant legal issues, which may be a more serious concern for the playwright, since they are framed by the law of the country within which the play is written. These include the laws of defamation and libel, and copyright and intellectual property rights. A play which infringes such legal constraints might find that it cannot be produced or it might place the playwright at risk of facing court proceedings.

Since it is through the process of creating verbatim plays that ethical issues arise, the chapter will examine a number of diverse methodologies. An analysis of these methodologies also reveals aspects of control over the text at different moments of its development, and this, too is relevant in terms of making the work. The process which an individual playwright makes of structuring primary sources to create the story s/he wants to tell, is entirely different when the work is written by a group. When this group includes those whose testimony is included in the work, the emphasis is again shifted. These differences are central to an understanding of the argument of this study and, for that reason,

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<sup>121</sup> This oral biography of Capote itself is an interesting example of testimony and serves as a useful comparison to similar use of testimony in verbatim theatre.



description of the working practices of individual writers and groups may be quoted at some length. This chapter will examine the process of selection and editing of texts, since it is the actions taken during these processes that trigger many key ethical questions. The decisions made regarding the writing and performance of the plays will be discussed in Chapter 4.

### 3.1 Ethical Concerns

*I am thinking, “Can I move away now and create a sort of fictional version of these characters’ stories?”, which is what I did with the Rwanda play<sup>122</sup> – could I change that person or merge two stories, but I feel this tremendous need to be loyal to them as individuals and loyal to their stories. It’s proving more difficult for me to break free from this at the moment, as I have this tremendous ethical concern or loyalty to them as human beings.*

– Sonja Linden<sup>123</sup>

Ethics derives from the Greek *ethikos*, which can be translated as ‘theory of living’ and together with *logos* and *pathos* was one of the three modes of persuasion cited by Aristotle as forming the basis of rhetoric. It involves, as Mitchell and Draper note (in the context of creating ethical guidelines in research for geography): “the study of standards of right and wrong, or the part of science involving moral conduct, duty and judgment,” and “a concern about explicitly developing guidelines to aid in determining appropriate conduct in a given research situation” (1982:3).

How strictly ethical frameworks are enforced in relation to verbatim theatre depends on the context of where the play is written. For example, the plays written as part of this study conform to the ethical guidelines of the University of East Anglia, and a play written within a therapeutic or penal context will conform to the guidelines of those institutions. It might appear that plays written for the stage would not require such guidelines, but a play that eschews any ethical basis may lay itself open to

<sup>122</sup> *Crocodile Seeking Refuge*, 2005.

<sup>123</sup> Interview with Ananda Breed and Alison Jeffers, In Place of War researchers, October, 2004. [http://www.inplaceofwar.net/project/Refugee CS/Sonja%20Linden.pdf](http://www.inplaceofwar.net/project/Refugee%20CS/Sonja%20Linden.pdf). Accessed 17 November, 2007.

accusations of manipulation and exploitation. A review of *The Girlfriend Experience*, for example, suggested that only if it were clear that the women in the play had been involved in the editing process, would the play escape suspicion of mockery (Gardner, 2009:34).

### 3.1.1 Methodologies

*I go out and find the event. I go to the place. I do a lot of work on it. I do a lot of research on it. I interview a whole lot of people. I find documents that have to do with that. Then I construct a play out of that. I'm working from life and it's very personal.*

– Emily Mann, cited in Dawson, 1999:5

In writing verbatim plays, choices begin with the decision of what the topic and/or issue will be, and they continue through all areas of research: Who are the people to be featured? Which narratives will be selected? What other texts are necessary to tell the story? Who asks and answers these questions depends on who is in control of the creative process, although this control may change hands during the development of a play.

During these early stages of creative activity, i.e., before the final text is written, there are significant differences between the way in which verbatim play are researched, edited or written, depending on whether they are communal works or the work of a sole playwright. In plays not written within a community, even when they are developed through a group, such as those created by Out of Joint, there is always a moment of separation from collective action to individual control. However much a group has been involved in the development of the project, they do not see it through to the written page. To what extent the 'authorship' of the

play therefore belongs to the earlier stages of its development, and how much to that period of separation depends on the playwright or playwrights and their perception of the creative process.

Research is an integral part of all plays based on verbatim material, but the way that research is carried out depends on whether the issue or the event on which the play is based is known in advance. In many verbatim plays it is the issue or the event which instigates the writing of the play, while in others, research into the lives of a group of people or a community generates the narrative. Research even for an issue-based play, may begin in an open-ended manner, what might be called a 'fishing trip', but then become more focused as specific facts and events are discovered. This was certainly the case in my own work on *Cuts*.

Merlin notes that at the beginning of the research process of *The Permanent Way* no-one, Hare included, "had any idea of plot or character. Indeed, both Hare and Stafford-Clark were unclear as to whether there would be any play at all: the interviews would reveal all" (2007:124). The preliminary interviews for the play were "with people whose experience of the railways covered a broad spectrum – from train operating company executives, investment bankers, politicians and entrepreneurs" (the 'men in suits') and "those who had survived or lost family in the four crashes" (2007:124). Hare finally found what he describes as the metaphor for the play, in "what is necessary suffering and what is unnecessary suffering" (Hammond & Steward, 2008:58). This came as a result of an interview with one of the bereaved women. Hare describes a similar process of finding the story for *Stuff Happens* from the research process (Hammond & Steward, 2008:57).

Events can themselves trigger change. While writing *Cuts*, I felt that the suicide of Pauline Campbell, one of the principal characters in the play,

could not remain unacknowledged.<sup>124</sup> *Unprotected* (Wilson et al, 2006) also changed because of a death during its research process. The circumstances of this play demonstrate a number of interesting features regarding how verbatim plays develop. The play began as a discussion instigated by the Liverpool Everyman theatre with the joint playwrights<sup>125</sup> about a suitable topic for a play on local issues. Thus the play begins with the theatre company (which continues to stay involved through its dramaturg, Suzanne Bell). The issue for the play is chosen because of its local resonance (there was at that time the possibility of a managed zone for street sex workers) rather than because the subject was an issue about which the playwrights felt strongly. Then, the focus of the play changed because of external events which happened while the play was being researched. Bell, in the play's programme notes, describes how the play changed because a Liverpool street worker, Anne Marie Foy, was murdered, and because government policy changed towards one of "zero tolerance on prostitution and a no to managed zones" (Wilson et al, 2006:xviii).<sup>126</sup> The writers note that they had to "react to these announcements immediately, returning to sources and gathering new information" (2006:xvix ).

It is interesting in this context to note the number of verbatim plays which are commissioned after the topic or issue has been decided, and how such commissions often dictate the nature of the collaborations. The plays, therefore, are not generated by the personal interest of the writer. The tribunal plays and *Guantanamo* were commissioned by Kent, whose role could be compared with that of a newspaper editor (Hammond & Steward, 2008:166) and a similar method of 'casting' the writer, because

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<sup>124</sup> Pauline ended her life during my researching and writing the play; her death affected other grieving families, particularly Pete Blanksby. It also changed *Cuts*. She became a central character during several drafts, although this unbalanced the play as a whole. It took a year before I could edit her words dispassionately.

<sup>125</sup> Esther Wilson, John Fay, Tony Green and Lizzie Nunnery.

<sup>126</sup> My numbering of unnumbered preliminary pages.

of their own personal interests and previous writing, occurred on *Gladiator Games*<sup>127</sup>, where Gupta was commissioned by the director Charlie Westenra, and on *My Name is Rachel Corrie*, commissioned by The Royal Court Theatre.

Collaborative research leading to the creation of a play is not new. Stafford-Clark, in devising new plays for *Joint Stock* and *Out of Stock*, has developed his methodology, over many years.<sup>128</sup> Merlin describes how, when researching *The Permanent Way*, the actors would undertake the interviews, return to the National Theatre Studio and, in character, feed back the collected information to the company. The narrative and the dialogue of the play were then devised from these workshops (2007:124-129). According to Stafford-Clark, the only difference between the methodology described by Merlin, and that of most of his previous productions, is that the workshop for *The Permanent Way* was not the inspiration for creating a fictional play.<sup>129</sup> The words heard in the workshop became those of the play. The difference, Stafford-Clark notes, is that “what a verbatim play does is flash your research nakedly” (Hammond & Steward, 2008:51).

The research process in creating verbatim theatre may take months or years. *The Laramie Project* took eighteen months to research and develop (Kaufman, 2001:vii), while *Guantanamo* and *Gladiator Games* were written to tight deadlines, the latter dictated by the fact that the play needed to be produced before the findings of the Mubarek Inquiry were published. Such fixed deadlines reveal a significantly different approach from that of many communal projects, which evolve over a longer

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<sup>127</sup> The play examines the murder of Zahid Mubarek in Feltham Young Offenders Institute, and suggests that the prison officers played a game, called Coliseum, placing together a racist, Steward and the Asian boy, Mubarek. The inquiry found no evidence of this.

<sup>128</sup> See pages 181-183.

<sup>129</sup> Though, as previously noted, it has been used before for creating verbatim plays.

period, with detailed consultation with those providing the testimony. Peter Cheeseman describes the six months of his research during which the chosen subject is investigated in depth through primary and secondary source materials as well as from “tape-recorded interviews with participants in the events” (1970:xiii).

Paul Brown documents one methodology in his introduction to *Aftershocks*, a play about the collapse of the Newcastle Workers Club, which “was developed at every stage with the community on which it was based.” (2001: ix). Another project, which involved the interviewees throughout the process of its development, was *Motherland* (1984), devised and directed by Elyse Dodgson, working with a group of London schoolchildren. Over a period of a year, the company devised the play, drawing on the experiences of families and the local community. This methodology is an entirely collaborative endeavour, and, as Alison Oddey points out, “is concerned with the collective creation of art, not the single vision of the playwright” (1994:4). *Motherland* combined the testimony of twenty-three women with songs and improvised scenes based on the women’s lives. Dodgson comments that the women, who were often related to the pupils, were fully involved and as part of the creative process, “shared anecdotes and songs and pointed out aspects of the play that were inaccurate” (1984:69).

The research process for verbatim theatre can produce a considerable quantity of material: *Unprotected* was “brought together and distilled” from “over 1,000 pages of transcripts” (2006:xx), *The Laramie Project* was edited from two hundred interviews and *Cuts* was edited from the transcripts of a three-week inquest and over a hundred pages of interview transcripts and other documents. The tribunal plays, too, require substantial amounts of editing, and are based on weeks or months of evidence. *The Colour of Justice* was drawn from more than eleven

thousand pages of transcripts of public hearings (Richard Norton-Taylor, 2004:7). Norton-Taylor describes the editing of so many words into “the relatively few that can be filtered through the mouths of actors in little more than two hours” as “a formidable task – an almost physical struggle” (Hammond & Steward, 2008:125). The act of creating a short work from so much material inevitably means that choices are made not only regarding who are the key witnesses in terms of importance to the inquiry, but also what are the key moments dramatically. The two may not be the same.<sup>130</sup>

Paget describes how, in the verbatim companies he was researching, interviews were transcribed by the interviewers, then read by the company and then underwent: “a rough-and-ready, but effective collective editing technique” (1987:329). This, he notes, involves going through all the material and prioritising it in terms of the effectiveness of its story (1987:329). He quotes Chris Honer, who remembers: “What we were very anxious to get all the time – and I can remember saying this to the company a lot – was ‘Go for the story!’ because people can generalise forever” (1987:324-325). The collaboration here is between members of the theatre company and not those who provided the interviews, while Brown’s collaborative method in *Aftershocks* involves the whole community, including the interviewees.

In many verbatim plays, the editing process is the writing process; there is no additional writing. Indeed, Cheeseman makes this a prerequisite of his plays (1970:xiii). The act of selection includes not only what to cut, but who to cut. Paget quotes David Thacker: “You might do a hundred interviews as a company and maybe seven or eight of them are key interviews” (1987:328). The decision of what is ‘a key interview’ and what is kept and what is discarded may be made in consultation with the

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<sup>130</sup> This point is made by Upton on the choice to omit many of the principal witnesses in *Bloody Sunday* (2009:187).



interviewees, by the theatre company, by the playwright or even by the researcher. The last being the methodology for *The Permanent Way*, where the actor-researchers choose which moments from their interviews to enact in the workshops, which Hare will use for his script. Merlin recalls that “We were subconsciously editing and filtering the material through our own creative sieves, based on the extensive notes we had made during the interviews” (2007: 125).

Finally, however, the task is one of editing and crafting; the key question that faces all those involved in the editing is that of finding a clear narrative. For Viner, faced with almost two hundred pages of writing by Rachel Corrie, the challenge was, “trying to construct a piece of theatre from fragments of journals, letters and emails, none of which was written with performance in mind (2005).” She became aware of the differences between her work as a journalist and that of a playwright in that in the latter case, she now had to be aware of how her words would work in performance. She notes that “stagecraft is what makes theatre what it is, and there was no point creating scenes that read well on the page if the actor playing Rachel, Megan Dodds, could not perform them” (2005).

The challenge of the playwright is to create a work of theatre which can be successfully performed and fulfils the need to tell the story which the event or the issues dictate. The emphasis placed on the former or the latter depends on whether the theatre company is working with those who provide the testimony or whether the issue is secondary to the wish to write a compelling play. The balance may also change if the playwright is working alone or as part of a group.

It might be thought that writing a play by committee would be a recipe for failure, but in communal theatre the collaborative process continues through the crafting of the final text. The need to respect and to maintain

the words of those whose testimony is being used is seen to be paramount. What is said on stage is generally determined by the polyphonic voices of those whose testimony is used.

The imposition of the authorial point of view, a solo voice, however, is evident in many verbatim plays. The fictitious ‘Passengers’ whose dialogue opens *The Permanent Way* serve to express Hare’s anger about the state of the railways in Britain and set the tone of the play. Bell, the dramaturg of *Unprotected*, tells how that play’s writers went back to the interviewees “again and again with leading questions until they got the answers they needed for the story they wanted to tell.”<sup>131</sup>

Christopher Bigsby describes Mann’s play *Still Life* (1980) as built from the stories of three people, a man, his wife and a lover who “exist in the world, recount their experiences, offer their own insights, voice their own needs” (2000:341). But, he adds, in terms of the play their “voices are orchestrated by Mann and hence the meanings that emerge are a product of her thematic concerns” (2000:341).

In *Gladiator Games*, Gupta uses the death of Zahid Mubarek to tell the story of racism in British prisons that she wants to tell. In her introduction to the published script, she writes that [whatever the outcome of the Mubarek Inquiry], “it seems obvious to me that institutional racism exists in the Prison Service and as such, by exposing it, the Mubarek family have done us all a favour” (2005:vi).<sup>132</sup> The story that Gupta wants to tell is not simply that which the evidence suggests, but was also influenced by her own experiences while researching the

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<sup>131</sup> ‘Between Fact and Fiction’ conference, 5 September 2007, University of Birmingham.

<sup>132</sup> My numbering of unnumbered preliminary pages.

play. At the 2006 Verbatim Seminar, Gupta revealed that she encountered the same institutional racism as that she was describing.<sup>133</sup>

It is not uncommon for the researcher to encounter the same problems as those whose stories are being investigated. I found conflicting opinions on the treatment of personality disorders, similar to that portrayed in *Cuts*. Some members of the psychiatric profession were hostile to the subject of the play, and one, indeed, commented that a playwright, who was not a member of the medical profession, “had no right” to place their practices under scrutiny.<sup>134</sup> Ralph, researching the deaths at Deepcut Barracks, decided that the stonewalling of the Ministry of Defence was so entrenched, that there was no point contacting them for information or comment (2008:23).

The act of cutting down transcripts or documents to create a script must inevitably be determined by the point of view of the editor(s). The organiser of the text is the person who controls the point of view of the play. Adrian Page makes this point when he says that McGrath “serves as a figure by which we judge how the text of *The Cheviot, [the Stag, and the Black Black Oil]* is to be read so that it conforms with his beliefs and with other texts for which he was responsible”. He argues that the ‘author’ “is therefore not the originator of all the discourse which is attributed to him or her, but merely a means of organising it coherently” (1994:20). This is a definition which fits the actions of several creators of verbatim plays rather neatly. Edgar describes this same process when he comments on his editing of the transcripts of Nixon’s White House

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<sup>133</sup> Gupta also noted that she found it “quite disheartening” that many white people wanted to know more about Robert Stewart, the young man who murdered Mubarek, though the text clearly permits such a response. .

<sup>134</sup> Personal telephone conversation with a senior psychiatrist, who had the responsibility of making recommendations to the courts regarding women with personality disorders.

tapes for a television play. He notes that although every word had been spoken:

[...] the play was bristling with impurities: the whole process making it had consisted of value judgements, from my judgement about what to put in and leave out, to the director's judgements about what to look at, and the actors' judgements about pace and inflections and gesture and mood. (1988:62)

These choices, says Edgar, formed an argument that Nixon was deluding himself, which, he notes, may, or may not, be correct. Texts can be edited to fit a number of points of view, and one ethical problem that arises from this is whether the playwright's point of view coincides with that of the person or people whose testimony is being used.

### 3.1.2 Ethical Frameworks and Codes of Practice

Communal theatre, with its close associations with the oral history tradition and its practices, is the area of verbatim theatre where a formalised ethical framework can be found. Brown, while working on *Aftershocks*, initiated a code of practice which involves the community at every stage of the theatrical process, and that became a basis for other Australian community arts organisations.<sup>135</sup> This methodology is not, however, universal. Cheeseman, working at the Victoria Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent, exhibits a similar sensitivity to Brown in his approach to his primary sources (Paget, 1987: 318), but there does not appear to have been a formalised code of practice in his work with local communities. With the exclusion of theatre companies working in schools or in a therapeutic context in prisons or mental health institutions, which operate

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<sup>135</sup> *Copyright, Moral Rights and Community Cultural Development* (2003) Australia Council Community Cultural Development Board.  
[http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/research/community\\_arts](http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/research/community_arts). Accessed 10 February 2010.

under their own codes of conduct and ethical frameworks, few of those working in the field of verbatim theatre follow the Australian model in working within strict written guidelines.

The more usual practice for companies and playwrights working in a community environment is that of informal ethical frameworks. Jeffers, for example, formed her own ethical system when working with refugees on *I've Got Something to Show You* “because the people who were being represented were all involved with the project and had effective power of veto of any or all of their speeches”.<sup>136</sup> The play was created by the refugees, combining their own testimonies with verbatim accounts from the inquest into the death of the Iranian asylum-seeker, Esrafil Tajaroghi, who set fire to himself in the offices of Refugee Action in Manchester. The refugees also played themselves on stage (Jeffers, 2009: 92).

Farber also works with those whose testimony forms the basis of her plays, and who play themselves on stage in the original productions of her plays. It is Farber's close relationship with those whose stories she develops dramatically which forms her ethical framework and, as Amanda Stuart Fisher notes, “it is the *quality*<sup>137</sup> of these relationships that safeguards the integrity of the work” (introduction to Farber, 2008:13).

Many playwrights working with refugees and other vulnerable people also feel that the ethical issues that arise from using their words in a play must take precedence over theatrical concerns. The question centres on the control of the text. This ethical problem is voiced by Sonja Linden, who founded the theatre company iceandfire in order to produce verbatim plays on the plight of asylum seekers, in the quote which opens this section.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Personal email, 22 February 2006.

<sup>137</sup> Fisher's emphasis.

<sup>138</sup> See page 258.

While there may not be a written code of practice to cover all aspects of verbatim theatre, the use of release forms is becoming increasingly widespread. One reason for this is that more verbatim plays are being published, often (following the example of Nick Hern Books) with the playscript being a part of the theatre programme, and publishers require release forms from the interviewees. According to Merlin, Hare is said to have been “extremely sensitive to the legal implications” of *The Permanent Way*, and there were “endless negotiations between the playwright and the National Theatre and the publishers of the play, Faber & Faber”.<sup>139</sup> Hare himself notes that “As far as I know, nobody’s unhappy with the way they are represented in *The Permanent Way* because I don’t think anyone is unfairly represented – except perhaps John Prescott.” (Merlin, 2007:129)<sup>140</sup>

It was clear from the practitioners in verbatim theatre who contributed to the Symposium on Verbatim Theatre Practices in July 2006 that ethical concerns are central to their work, though there are no uniform codes of practice. Many of those working in this field reported that they had informal ethical frameworks and guidelines. The question of how far writers involve those whose testimony they use in their plays showed a range of practices. Gupta, working on *Gladiator Games*, involved the Mubarek family, but not the other people who appear in her play; Slovo always used release forms and agreed to show the interviewees every draft of *Guantanamo*; Holmes sent drafts to all those he interviewed for *Fallujah*, but for practical reasons (such as the movement of army personnel) could not involve them in all stages of creating the play. Merlin, who interviewed Hare about the process of creating *The*

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<sup>139</sup> Symposium on Verbatim Theatre Practices in Contemporary Theatre, 13 July 2006.

<sup>140</sup> There was a problem, in fact, with the representation of the spokesman from GNER, who had been misrepresented. Merlin noted at the Verbatim Symposium that the Operating Executive’s phrase ‘Thank Christ it’s not us’ (Hare 2003:57) was originally juxtaposed to give the impression that Operative Executive did not care about safety issues and this was changed.

*Permanent Way*, noted that he contacted the survivors and the bereaved, though not the ‘men in suits’.

In creating *Cuts* and *Trash*, as previously noted, I sent drafts to all the families involved, but not the witnesses at Petra Blanksby’s inquest. In the case of *Trash*, I sent Jean every draft, and also read her the final draft so that she could hear how it would sound.<sup>141</sup>

Hare was aware of ethical issues when writing *The Permanent Way*, though it is worth noting his observation that the choices will either be made in consultation with those whose testimony is used “or through the artistic balancing of what you’re trying to say” (Merlin, 2007:129). The ‘or’ here is significant. For many verbatim playwrights the conjunction would be ‘and’; both ethical and artistic concerns are deemed to be necessary. For Hare, there is no debate; it is his role as a playwright to choose the point of view and not those whose words are used in the script.

There are issues of hegemony to be considered here. The control of the text of an verbatim play stems from the fact that the narrative is generally drawn from interviews. Interviews, however, are themselves a form of control, and this raises a number of ethical issues. These derive “from the unequal distribution of power, as in the confessional and the interrogation”, as Nichols points out (1991:47) in relation to documentary film, though it is equally relevant here. The questions he asks: “How is the inherently hierarchical structure of the form handled?” and “What rights or prerogatives does the interviewee retain?” are also those raised by the researcher creating verbatim theatre. It is in the answers to such questions that one might begin to form ethical guidelines for the genre.

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<sup>141</sup> Her response was “That’s a grand story, even if it weren’t mine”. From conversation with Jean Pearson, Shipley, September 2008.

Blythe says that when she wrote *Cruising*, she showed each draft script to her interviewees, and that the interviewees were happy with “how they were portrayed”.<sup>142</sup> However, what may appear innocuous on the page can be very different in the theatre. It might also be the case that the pensioners, whose search for partners forms the subject of this play, were too polite to complain about the manner in which their lives and words were exploited, or that they did indeed want a moment of fame. Blythe’s rationale highlights the hegemonic inequality between playwright and interviewees, and cannot be used as a justification for caricature, whether intentional or not. If verbatim theatre acts as a conduit for unheard voices and gives them an audience, integrity in the representation of these voices must be of paramount importance.

How the interviewees are viewed by those creating the plays would seem to be at the heart of many ethical problems. Merlin acknowledges that Hare calls her and her fellow researchers “hunter-gatherers” (2007:125), a term which is heavily loaded and sets up a mental framework which would tend to exclude the feelings of the interviewees.<sup>143</sup> As Paget argues:

This self-consciously aggressive metaphor was used, it seems to me, to encourage them to enter the story-space of people interviewed with the purpose of expropriating it – thus by-passing any ethical dilemmas the company might feel about subsequent exploitation of traumatic stories of loss and suffering (2009:230).

In the plays created by Linden, Jeffers, Farber and Dodgson, those whose words are spoken have the same aims as the playwright. It is when there

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<sup>142</sup> Comment made at the Symposium on Verbatim Theatre Practices in Contemporary Theatre, 14 July 2006.

<sup>143</sup> Further study might also examine the gender issues inherent in the term ‘hunter-gatherer’ and the masculine definition of the role and the gender of some of those who were carrying out the work.



is a disparity between the two that there is the potential for ethical problems. Those plays not created as a joint project will inevitably have a more challenging relationship with the people whose words and lives provide the primary source material. In researching *Cuts* and *Trash*, I was aware that my aims were not always those of the families I was interviewing. They wanted to apportion blame on to individuals; I wanted to use the individual stories as examples of governmental failure. Through discussion, we reached a consensus that I would write what I wanted to write; they retained the right of veto, but not to insist on what went into the plays. They would, however, be free to tell other aspects of their story elsewhere. Pauline Campbell, for example, was working with Emilia di Girolamo on a play *Duty of Care*, about Pauline and her daughter,<sup>144</sup> and Pete and Kirsty Blanksby are in talks with the writer Helen Raynor for a version of their story for BBC television.<sup>145</sup>

This agreement between the playwright and the interviewer that the play is only telling a part of the story which will be fully revealed elsewhere is articulated in *Trash*: “I tell you summat, when I do write the book, I won’t be holding names back. And I won’t be holding nothing back, because I’ll say it as it is.”<sup>146</sup> What was important to me in writing the two verbatim plays was openness and honesty in my dealings with Jean and the other families.

Ethical issues arise because of the use of real people in verbatim plays. Since it could be said that the meaning of a play is conveyed through its structure, and it is the playwright who controls that structure, the control of the play thus lies with the playwright. Even when nothing is invented, and the actual words are those of the people who appear in the play, the playwright and, later the director, may feel entitled to change the way

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<sup>144</sup> In development, 2008

<sup>145</sup> In development, 2009 .

<sup>146</sup> See page 66. In subsequent conversations Jean acknowledged that such a book might not be publishable for reasons of libel.

that such words are understood by an audience through editing, juxtaposition and modes of performance. This may result in a derogatory, or even defamatory, reproduction of original testimony.

An example of the problems of this can be seen when formal witness discourse at a tribunal is positioned beside the informal language of an interview. In *Gladiator Games*, the words of the Mubarek family come from personal interviews while the words of prison officers are taken from testimony at inquiries (and from the fictionalised sections of the play). I would suggest that there is an imbalance in this juxtaposition of discourse.

In one scene of the play, the words of Nigel Herring, Branch Chairman of the Prison Officers' Association, are closely followed by a speech by Imtiaz Mubarek, Zahid Mubarek's uncle. Imtiaz's speech is informal, with many contractions:

I don't know...I really don't know...the way these two just come together in one cell – it just doesn't really make sense. I mean, you've just gotta take a look at his convictions.

Herring's speech is stiff and gives the impression that the prison officer is a man who is not open, whereas, it may simply be a result of the strain of being a witness:

Any 'Gladiator' practice would have to involve the complicity of many officers. The great majority of officers have complete commitment to the welfare of prisoners and would not shrink from reporting any misconduct of this kind within a short time. No such practice could survive or be kept secret (Gupta, 2006:73).

I was aware of this problem of discourse when using witness statements in *Cuts*. The expert witness and the assured barrister have stronger voices than the nervous witnesses. There were some witnesses whose speech I did not use for precisely these reasons. They sounded, from the way they spoke, as if they were culpable for Petra's death, which was not necessarily the truth. They may have simply been nervous because they were in court.

Discourse can work, too, to enhance a person. Hare's representation of George Bush in *Stuff Happens* makes the President less tongue-tied and gives him "a kind of passionate lucidity" (Soto-Morettini, 2005:318). In a radio interview about *Stuff Happens*, Hare explains that his model for his recreations of real characters is Shakespeare, "in the sense that Shakespeare re-invents events for thematic purposes". Hare's version of Bush, he claims, is a richer character, and this will enable the audience to "see the real George Bush a little bit differently when they've seen the play" (Tusa, 2005).

In the case of heads of State, there is precedent and even justification for the use of people "for thematic purposes". Hare's version will not be the sole version; those in power have other avenues to enable their point of view and character to be placed before the public. However, in the case where ordinary people are the subjects of verbatim plays, this may not be true. The version given in the play of who they are may be the only version that is ever made public. Furthermore, a large number of those whose stories are used in the creation of verbatim plays have already suffered some form of loss of control over their lives. Those who have suffered bereavement or abuse may use the opportunity to tell their stories as a form of taking control over these stories and to reclaim their own lives. In such cases the playwright should step very carefully before taking away such control.

Verbatim theatre sometimes prides itself on its superiority over other forms of media, journalism in particular. However, if it is to occupy a moral high ground, then, I suggest, that it has to abide by best practice. Rob Ritchie, when investigating his script for *Who Bombed Birmingham?*<sup>147</sup> (1990), notes that after he heard what one person had said, he waited for another to confirm it before using it in his script: “As a good journalist would”.<sup>148</sup>

Journalistic codes of practice include those operated by the British Press Complaints Commission<sup>149</sup> and the National Union of Journalists.<sup>150</sup> The former states that an investigative reporter can freely report and quote from their sources, provided that nothing they write or broadcast will be “inaccurate, misleading or distorted”, while the Code of Conduct of the NUJ states that “A journalist shall strive to ensure that the information he/she disseminates is fair and accurate, avoid the expression of comment and conjecture as established fact and falsification by distortion, selection or misrepresentation.” The writer of a verbatim play should strive for nothing less than this.

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<sup>147</sup> A documentary film for Granada Television, produced and directed by Mike Beckham. It narrates the investigations by the journalist, Chris Mullin, into the Birmingham pub bombings of 1974 by the IRA and the claims of innocence by the ‘Birmingham Six’ who were jailed, and names the likely culprits. The film was instrumental in securing the release of the Six.

<sup>148</sup> Personal interview, 5 June, 2006.

<sup>149</sup> Press Complaints Commission <http://www.pcc.org.uk/cop/practice.html>. Accessed 10 February 2010.

<sup>150</sup> <http://www.nuj.org.uk>. Accessed 10 February 2010.

### 3.2 Legal Constraints

Theatre does not have the constraints of television or journalism, which have to operate within codes of practice set by their governing and regulatory bodies, and it has a long history of being transgressive. Nevertheless, it is bound by the laws of the country in which it is written and performed. The fact that verbatim theatre is not, as yet, subject to the same layers of legal scrutiny as televised docudramas may be because theatre is seen to reach a much smaller audience. However, legal action against a verbatim play could begin to change this perception. In Britain there are a number of laws which relate to verbatim theatre which include defamation or libel, confidentiality, and copyright and intellectual property rights.

In British law, regarding defamation, the burden of proof rests with the defendant to prove that the manner in which an individual was portrayed was not defamatory. This, therefore, is an area of law which poses serious problems for the verbatim practitioner. The law, which previously existed to protect status, has been changed by the introduction of the Human Rights Act in 2000 with its requirement for the right of freedom of expression.<sup>151</sup> Yet it remains on the statutes and could pose a risk for the verbatim playwright.

The law of libel is a significant danger for a writer of verbatim theatre. In an early draft of *Cuts* I included an actual remark made to me outside the court at Wakefield, though not recorded. (The inquest itself was transcribed by hand, as previously noted, since only the court's own tape recorder is permitted). One of the prison officers turned to me before he went into the witness box and said in precisely the way I wrote it for the play:

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<sup>151</sup> The changes and the implications with regard to potential libel are explored in detail by Robertson and Nichol, 2002:67-151.

Better go. I'm on next. (*With sudden venom, but still smiling*)  
 And if Mr Thomas gives me a hard time, I'll fucking slash his car  
 tyres. (*Beat.*) Only joking

I included this, changing his name, and placing the words into the mouth of a composite character to protect his identity. It seemed to me to be a pivotal moment in the play, when, for a second, the mask slips and we see the person. But it was clear that the conversation had taken place outside a court, and since I had not attended any other inquests apart from Petra's, this meant that it could be traced to a small group of New Hall prison officers. They might well deny that the remark was made and I had no proof of its veracity. It was, therefore, potentially libellous. I cut it.

Defamation can be avoided by the process of informed consent, whereby those who participate in verbatim plays sign a document, (such as a release form) indicating that they have been fully informed about the nature of the play and the use of their testimony within it. Such action would prevent problems such as those which occurred at the London Academy of Dramatic Art (LAMDA). According to Peter James, LAMDA's Principal, the reason the play *North Greenwich* (a verbatim play devised by students in conjunction with the playwright, Mark Ravenhill, directed by James) was never shown outside the school was because of objections by the interviewees:

Every interviewee was warned that we would make a play from the interview material – but not that their very words would be spoken by actors pretending to be them. We found people amazingly unguarded – even after warning. Most were OK about the verbatim outcome. The one or two whose objections cooked the play's goose, simply didn't like what they had said. The

grounds for their objections, however, were that they were not warned about the verbatim technique.<sup>152</sup>

Alan Ward, in his guidelines written for The Oral History Society states that “It is unethical, and in many cases illegal, to use interviews without the informed consent of the interviewee, in which the nature of the use or uses is clear and explicit”.<sup>153</sup> Informed consent is also required by the University of East Anglia’s research guidelines which state that normally participants in research should give their informed consent prior to participation and, wherever possible, this should be obtained in writing. Though it does acknowledge that where this is not possible, “oral consent should be obtained, ideally in the presence of at least one witness”.<sup>154</sup> The importance of informed consent is not merely legal but also ethical.

Written consent, however, is not always possible. The mercenaries who kicked open the door of the Joint Stock rehearsal room and provided the text of *Yesterday’s News* are unlikely to have been willing to sign a form (Roberts & Stafford-Clark, 2007:23). The same is true of the prison officers I spoke to in quiet pubs while researching *Cuts*, and whom I had to convince before they would talk to me, that no-one would ever be able to identify them from what was said in the play. The composite, fictional characters, in the play, such as Scottish Dave, are based on conversations and blogs of seven different prison officers and no single officer can, I am certain, be identified.

The frank interviews which I use in *Cuts* could not have been obtained if I had asked for written consent or used a tape recorder. The prison officers would not have allowed their names to appear on any form or

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<sup>152</sup> Peter James, personal email, 2 October, 2006.

<sup>153</sup> <http://www.ohs.org.uk/ethics/index.php>. Accessed 10 February 2010..

<sup>154</sup> [http://www.uea.ac.uk/polopoly\\_fs/1.29004!research-ethics-policy-final-21june2006.pdf](http://www.uea.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.29004!research-ethics-policy-final-21june2006.pdf). Accessed 10 February 2010.

their voices on tape. Ritchie makes a similar argument regarding confidentiality and trust from his own experience researching in Northern Ireland when writing *Who Bombed Birmingham?*: “You have to be able to talk ‘off the record’”.<sup>155</sup> Fears of job loss or concerns about personal safety have to be respected.

In terms of ownership of verbatim material, issues of copyright are equally serious. Copyright, as Robertson and Nicol note, “is the most technical branch” of media law (2002:289). It is a section of intellectual property rights which comprise copyright, designs, patents and trade marks and protects ownership of ideas, including literary and artistic works. The current act in British law is the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.<sup>156</sup> Under the Act, it is an offence to perform any of the following acts without the consent of the owner:

- Copy the work
- Rent, lend or issue copies of the work to the public
- Perform, broadcast or show the work in public
- Adapt the work

The author of a work may also have certain moral rights:

- The right to be identified as the author
- The right to object to derogatory treatment

The key aspect of copyright, as it affects the practice of verbatim theatre, is that the words spoken by an interviewee and recorded or noted by a researcher or playwright remain the copyright of the original speaker. The words cannot legally be used without permission. Legally, the

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<sup>155</sup> personal interview 5 June 2006

<sup>156</sup> The original text for the 1988 Copyright Designs and Patent Act can be found at the OSPI (HMSO) website:  
[http://www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts1988/Ukpga\\_19880048\\_en\\_1.htm](http://www.opsi.gov.uk/acts/acts1988/Ukpga_19880048_en_1.htm). Accessed 10 February 2010.



ownership of much of what is spoken in verbatim plays rests with the individual, original speaker. As Robertson and Nicol point out:

Copyright can exist in a literary work only if it is recorded, but it need not be recorded in writing. Memoirs dictated on a tape are protected even before the tape is transcribed. [...] This will mean that people interviewed by reporters have copyright in the words they utter if the journalist has taken an accurate note or recorded them (2002:293).

Specific legislation allows the use of recorded speech without infringing the speaker's copyright for use by journalists and reporters, but this clause "for reporting a current event or in a broadcast or cable programme" (Robertson and Nicol, 2002:330) would not cover use of recorded speech within a play. It is more likely to come under the same legislation as that practised by those who use recorded speech in oral history, which "gives interviewees the right to be named as the 'authors' of their recorded words if they are published or broadcast". Moreover, under copyright law, publishers and broadcasters may not edit, adapt or make alterations to their words "which create a false impression". These rights are retained, according to Ward,<sup>157</sup> by interviewees, whoever owns the copyright. Verbatim theatre has not yet been tested in court whether the rights given to oral history interviewees would also pertain to those interviewed for a play.

Copyright of printed material also belongs to the holder of the stated author and cannot be used or adapted without permission. Since many documents are reproduced and adapted within verbatim plays, this is another problematic area. One instance of use of printed material that

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<sup>157</sup> <http://www.ohs.org.uk/ethics/index.php>. Accessed 10 February 2010.

appears to be a breach of copyright occurs in Soans's use of the Palestinian schoolgirl diaries in *Talking to Terrorists*.

In the published version of *Talking to Terrorists*, the final words of the play are spoken by a 'Bethlehem Schoolgirl'. I include the speech in its entirety since the points it raises are central to the argument about how far one should change original testimony:

This year things are getting worse. Last April...the saddest day; one of the girls in the form below me, Christine, was killed by an Israeli sniper. The Israelis said it was a mistake, but they can't bring her back can they?

When I first saw the Twin Towers on television, I felt sorry. But now I feel happy that they died. It's their turn to suffer. I could see many thousands of them die. I wouldn't feel a thing. (Soans, 2005:96-97)

An examination of the source of this speech, *The Wall Cannot Stop Our Stories: Diaries from Palestine 2000-2004*<sup>158</sup> demonstrates that not only did the schoolgirls (plural) wish no harm to the Americans, but all the references in the diaries to the Twin Towers (there are four in total, in 2001 and 2002) are thoughtful. Dana Hilal's (September 9 2002) is typical: "I felt really sorry for the innocent people who got killed. What affected me most was when I saw people waving to be rescued and no one could help them" (2004:65). Moreover, the juxtaposition of these reflections and the comments on the death of Christine Sa'adeh is gratuitous. Christine was shot in March 2003 (the word sniper is never used in the diaries) and the collective entries about Christine (2004:224-

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<sup>158</sup> The published version of *Talking to Terrorists*, does not mention the sources, but a printed addendum attached by the Royal Court notes that "The school girl's speeches that close each act are based on *War [sic] Cannot Stop Our Stories: Diaries from Palestine 2000-2004* by Terra Sancta School for Girls.

245) generate prayers for Christine and her family and a desire for peace. Such a radical rewriting of original material raises ethical as well as legal issues. It may have seemed to be a dramatic way to close the play, but should this have been at the expense of changing the testimony of the original writer?

In the Royal Court production, July 8, 2005, the day after the London bombs, the text was changed: the Bethlehem schoolgirl was sorry and hoped no else would suffer.<sup>159</sup> It appeared to me at the time that this was an unethical change of meaning, but in fact it conforms to the original diaries.

The danger of infringing copyright law would argue for informed consent to be the norm, and copyright of printed material to be obtained. As Robertson and Nicol note: “Consent to publication is a complete defence” (2002:140). In order to ensure that productions and publication of verbatim plays are not hindered, it might seem that the playwright does need to ensure that the copyright has been assigned by the original owner of that copyright, and that, as far as can be known, there are no potential legal problems ahead.

Tensions will always exist between the wish to write challenging plays and avoidance of ethical and legal difficulties. The personal point of view of the playwright may be the driving force behind the research, editing and writing of the play, but many verbatim plays use the voices of those who do not have any other means, other than the play, of reaching a public audience. In creating a work which itself has an ethical core – the issues themselves are generally driven by a sense of injustice – should it not be the case that equal weight be given to the ethical use of the testimony used in the play? Reportage may be crucial in revelations of

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<sup>159</sup> The change is recorded in notes I took at this performance.

malpractice or injustice, and it may need a skilful playwright using all the tools of stagecraft to form the research into a compelling play. However, the question must also be asked, whether, in writing such a play, ethical boundaries can be crossed.

## 4

## Making Room for the Imagination: Issues of Authorship and Aesthetics

*It was a play like any other. It involved me in as much work*

– David Hare, 2005:78.

Verbatim theatre is a genre that employs factual material as a basis for its text, and this study has until now concentrated on these factual aspects. It has examined how much significance the plays place on the veracity of their source material, and whether this is justified, and how the plays function in terms of delivery of the factual material. These areas relate to the content of the plays; much of what has been written in respect of this material would also be relevant if the texts were written as prose or for film. The theatrical aspects of these plays have not been fully explored, neither has the aesthetic of the genre. This is not accidental; the emphasis in verbatim theatre is clearly weighted on the side of the evidence and not the aesthetic.

Aesthetic considerations are not ignored by those working within the genre. Every playwright devising a play using testimonial and documentary evidence faces the problem of how to balance the factual with the theatrical; the need to report facts against the creative impulse. There is a wish to respect those whose lives are being represented, and, at the same time, a desire to create a compelling work of drama. Gillian Slovo makes this tension clear when she asks “at what point does the aesthetic imperative intervene in the structure of the story?”<sup>160</sup> But I

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<sup>160</sup> Symposium on Verbatim Theatre Practices in Contemporary Theatre, 13 July 2006.

would suggest that aesthetics are, with a few notable exceptions, a secondary consideration.

This chapter will consider issues of authorship and aesthetics. It will first employ a brief narratological analysis of some verbatim play texts and focus on the use of rhetorical tropes to forge a relationship between the stage and the audience. It will also explore the use of metatheatricity to allow the playwright to examine some of the key issues of the genre itself, including questions on the nature of veracity and the reliability of witnesses.

Whether verbatim theatre allows any room for the artistic impulse or whether it tends to stifle it is a question that relates not only to the writing of the plays, but also their performance. It might be said that the problem of the genre lies in its dependence on a realist performance. The quip “stools or chairs?” cited by Edgar (2008)<sup>161</sup>, as characteristic of the genre, reflects a form of theatre that is often viewed as inherently untheatrical. This chapter will question whether in writing verbatim plays it is possible to challenge that assumption.

The method of this interrogation will be through a brief description of some recent productions of verbatim plays, but will focus primarily on some of the choices made in the development of *Cuts* and *Trash*. This empirical research will draw on the writing journal I kept during this period, and will therefore be expressed in a more personal register. This analysis will also demonstrate how the questions which influenced the writing of my two plays came out of the critical study of the genre, and thus, how the critical work of this study formed an intrinsic part of the creative process.

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<sup>161</sup> The originator of the quip was Anthony Frost, quoted in my paper “Present voices: Facing the aesthetic challenge of contemporary verbatim theatre” at the Sharp End Conference, University of Portsmouth, 15 September 2007.

## 4.1 Verbatim as Theatre: Narrative and Performative Techniques

Verbatim theatre employs a number of techniques in order to create a particular relationship with its audience predicated on the delivery of an ‘authentic’ experience. Its performative form is that of realism, while the writing uses a number of rhetorical tropes to create the simulacrum of a conversation between speaker and audience. In some instances, the plays use metatheatrical references. This can have two distinct functions: it can allow the audience to be aware of the (unseen) playwright, or it can enable them to stand outside the action and examine the play and the issues raised by the play.

### 4.1.1 Rhetoric

The rhetorical tropes most commonly found in verbatim plays are direct address, repetition and the use of rhetorical questions. An analysis of Hare’s verbatim plays, for example, reveal how rhetoric is employed to carry an argument and, at the same time, cement the *relationship* between speaker and audience. In *Via Dolorosa*, Hare’s questioning of the position of the Calvary Stone in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre becomes the means for asking a number of other questions on the nature of truth and belief. The passage is worth quoting in full since it packs in several rhetorical tropes from the anaphora of the repeated ‘Nobody’ to the rising climax of rhetorical questions, ending with the repetition of the final question:

And what’s more – hold on, here we go – is the stone, in fact, on the right spot? Nobody knows. Archaeologists also dispute. Nobody *can* know because nobody knows where the city walls were. Nobody agrees. Where was Calvary indeed? So for now –

look, is anything certain? –let’s just do as the family next to me and drop alarmingly to our knees, on the working assumption – let’s just *assume* – X marks the spot, and kiss the stone. After all, does the literal truth of it matter? Does the literal truth matter? Aren’t we kissing an idea? Stones or ideas? Stones or ideas? (1998:37)

Hare notes that the writing of *Via Dolorosa* involved him “in as much structural labour as any story with twenty-five actors and a dozen changing locations” (2005:78). In the opening scene of *Stuff Happens*, too, the use of anaphora assists in the creation of the rhythm which characterises this first scene and sets the pace for the whole play. Here, an unnamed actor, in a choric role, introduces the key players, the American and British heads of State, with a series of repeated or similar phrases (2004:6-7).

In writing *Trash*, I found that Jean’s natural language tended towards rhetoric. When she described how the police told her of her daughter’s death, she repeated “they wouldn’t listen” five times, and I included that repetition in the play. I also added to Jean’s natural use of rhetoric a number of structural devices. These include Jean’s rhetorical address to the audience, the use of ‘Shhh!’ in the opening scene as a metonym for how Jean is treated by the State throughout the play, the control of time and the use of prolepsis in the first reference to bonfire night.

The most significant rhetorical technique in verbatim theatre, however, is the use of direct address. Its tone is frequently informal, as if suggesting an already existing relationship. In the opening of *Trash*, Jean addresses the audience with the words, “So where was I?”, which suggests that Jean has already been discussing the issues of the play. In the excerpt



from *Via Dolorosa*, the repeated use ‘we’ implies that the audience and the speaker (Hare) are following the same argument.

In *Guantanamo* the audience is introduced to Moazzam Begg, one of the prisoners in Guantanamo, through the address to the audience of Moazzam Begg’s father: “I will start with his childhood so you have the full picture” (Brittain & Slovo, 2004:6). This is the language of the oral storyteller: ‘I am going to tell you a story’. Again, the address of ‘you’ from the stage creates a ‘we’ in the auditorium; the audience collectively becomes an empathetic collaborator in the relationship between the speaker and the listener.

The prevalence of direct address in verbatim theatre may be said to be an endeavour to reinstate the relationship between character/actor and spectator that was common in previous eras. The prologue in *Stuff Happens* instructs the audience on the frame of mind it should adopt while watching the play, and at the same time acknowledges their presence in the world of the action:

The Inevitable is what will seem to happen to you purely by chance. The Real is what will strike you as really absurd. Unless you are certain you are dreaming, it is certainly a dream of your own. Unless you exclaim – ‘There must be some mistake’ – you must be mistaken. (2004:3)

The repetition in this speech (it uses the pronoun ‘you’ six times) leaves the audience in no doubt who is being addressed, but a sense of direct address may be created by methods other than the vocative. In *The Exonerated*, Delbert, a choric figure, creates a bond of communal experience by addressing the audience as ‘we’. In the opening address he

reinforces the term ‘we’ and ‘we the people’ by the use of ‘this’ and ‘here’:

How do we, the people, get outta this hole, what’s the way to  
fight, might I do what Richard and Ralph and Langston ’n’ them  
did? <sup>162</sup>

It is not easy to be a poet here. Yet I sing.

I sing.

(Blank & Jensen, 2006:21-22)

Familiarity is also achieved through the use of domestic detail. Soans comments on the amount of text in his plays which comes from “the initial pleasantries” and the “closing formalities” (Hammond & Steward, 2008:38-39). In *Talking to Terrorists*, we hear Mo Mowlam (Secretary of State, S.S.1) talking about broken biscuits and interacting with her cleaner, Marjory, who is vacuuming. There are references to a Labrador puppy, who eats everything in the house and is “a terrible farter” (2005:25). Soans notes that these incidental domestic details are important because “they humanise the situation. They are the common link between the interviewee and the audience; they make the audience care” (Hammond & Steward, 2008:38-39). They also offer moments of humour in plays that might otherwise be unrelentingly bleak.

Verbatim plays recreate lived experience, and the use of direct address and reference to familiar social activities serve to invite the audience to be a part of that re-creation. Reinelt acknowledges this when she observes that “documentary calls the public sphere into being by presupposing it exists, and constructs its audience to be part of a

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<sup>162</sup> The black American writers Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison and Langston Hughes.

temporary sociality to attend to the matters portrayed” (2009:11-12).<sup>163</sup> The audience is invited to feel that they are included in what is happening; the lives of those on stage are not separate from their own.

#### 4.1.2 Metatheatricality

Direct address is a vocative form and the subject of that address may not always be the audience. In certain plays, the address is clearly aimed at the unseen playwright. In the first draft of *Cuts*, I considered this metatheatrical approach and appeared as a character who explains to the audience the impetus for the play. The problem of placing myself within the play was that it suggested equivalency between my own story of finding the narrative and that of the women in prison. Through a number of drafts, I experimented with different ways to find a narrator, including a fictional journalist, whose words were partly taken from a number of different writers and partly invented.<sup>164</sup> One advantage of this version was that I could include some humour in the play. However, none of these solutions proved satisfactory since the technique itself became the focus of the play instead of a means by which the audience could discover the story.

However, even after cutting myself out of the play, the idea of employing some form of self-reflexivity continued. I wrote one draft which foregrounded my sources and allowed the actors to step out of character and question the narrative. However, I eventually dismissed this, since again the technique became the subject of the play. I also wanted to avoid any form of self-referentiality that placed the playwright centre stage.

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<sup>163</sup> See Paola Botham “From Deconstruction to Reconstruction: A Habermasian Framework for Contemporary Political Theatre” *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 18, 3, 2008, pp. 307-317 for a useful evaluation of verbatim theatre in terms of public space.

<sup>164</sup> Holmes creates a fictional journalist to represent several real people in *Fallujah*, and Gregory Burke creates a fiction of himself to interrogate the soldiers in *Black Watch* (2006).

An example of this is the self-referentiality in Soans's *Life after Scandal*, where the speeches of the unnamed actors open the play and demonstrate to the audience not only that they are watching a play about a scandal, but one by an established playwright (2007:27). Blythe, as previously noted, places herself as the invisible questioner of the prostitutes whose lives are explored in *The Girlfriend Experience*, and includes a voice-over describing the methodology of the play, while one of the principal characters discusses how she feels about becoming a character in a play.<sup>165</sup> Hare also places himself invisibly on stage and allows himself, in *The Permanent Way*, to be thanked by a bereaved mother (speaking to her dead child) for being able to tell her story (2003:38). As Bottoms observes, Hare also has his speakers address the audience as 'David'<sup>166</sup>, and "though ostensibly a reminder of the original interview contexts, the result in the theatre is a sense that 'David' is some all-seeing, godlike figure, hovering invisibly somewhere in the auditorium" (2006:59).

Metatheatricality can function as a means of Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*, distancing the audience so that they may maintain the objectivity of a jury. The plays written and produced by Kaufman, including *I Am My Own Wife*, which he directed, employ metatheatricality to frame their action and keep the audience at a distance. *The Laramie Project* is an investigation into the murder of Matthew Shepard, in the Wyoming town of Laramie. The play holds up a mirror to American society, but at the same time, through the self-reflexivity of the text, it examines the nature of its own theatricality. Kaufman promotes an objective view from his audiences because, in foregrounding its operations, the play is, as Walter Benjamin observes of Brecht, "transparent as to its artistic armature" (1973:15). The questions posed by Kaufman's theatre company, Tectonic, also appear to engender a wider debate within Laramie itself. Trish Steger, the store owner,

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<sup>165</sup> See page 250-254.

<sup>166</sup> They do it five times. On pages 19, 26, 50, 59 and 70.

responds to Doc O'Connor's opinion about Matthew with: "I don't know, you know, how does one person ever tell about another?" (2001:19). The metatheatricality here introduces ambivalence into the play. It invites audiences to question the veracity of the subject matter and stand back from the action. Whereas most verbatim plays rely on the total acceptance by the audience of the truth of the plays, those by Kaufman allow room for uncertainty.

#### 4.1.3 The Creation of Immediate Theatre: Verbatim Plays in Performance

*Kirsty Wark: What I think is a strange conundrum in this [...] because it's in a theatre, you're kind of unsettled. It starts with calling for a minute's silence, all rise. In fact, when I was there, only one person rose in the audience.*

*Mark Kermode: Everyone stood up the night I was there. What happened from then on, every time the judge came in everyone wondered whether or not they should get up. It was like the theatre had become a courtroom.*

– Discussion on *Justifying War*, BBC 2 *Newsnight Late Review*,  
November 10, 2003<sup>167</sup>

Theatre is not simply text; it cannot exist without performance and an audience to witness that performance. If it is true that audiences attend verbatim plays in order to partake in something that appears to be 'real' and 'true', or to experience an 'authentic' relationship', then how that reality is performed is crucial to the way it is received. In the absence of a plot in verbatim theatre, the narrative of the play is carried by the audience learning from evidence provided by a number of different

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<sup>167</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/newsnight/review/3258165.stm>. Taken from the teletext subtitles that are generated live. Accessed 10 February 2010.

people. Moreover, the emotional weight of the play requires that each character create an empathetic bond with the audience.

For many writers and directors of verbatim plays, it is not enough for an audience to listen to the testimony, but they must create a space where the audience can feel they are participating within the re-lived process of testimony. As Martin argues, the production of verbatim theatre underscores Richard Schechner's theory of 'restored behaviour'.<sup>168</sup> There is a progression from original event through the reporting of that event through testimonial evidence and the creation of a document which archives that testimony to the performance of the archive, the representation of the testimony as performance. Verbatim creates its own particular apparatus. It invents, Martin notes, "its own particular truth through elaborate aesthetic devices, a strategy that is integral to the restoration of behaviour within" (2006:10).

The chosen performance style for verbatim plays is naturalism. This ranges from the virtually bare stage to the 'hyper-naturalism' of the tribunal plays at The Tricycle Theatre (Kent, cited in Hammond & Steward, 2008:156). Megson describes the style of the tribunal plays as tending towards "hardcore illusionism" (2005:370). There is often no applause at the end of the play, and the audience adopts court procedure, standing when the judge enters. These productions, notes Kent, play "with the house lights up, which is an attempt to diffuse the theatricality of the process, so that the audience are in the room with the characters and we're all in it together" (Hammond & Steward, 2008:156). Naturalism is created by the way the cast wear microphones so that they do not have to raise their voices unnaturally, they consult papers, look up information on their laptops, and talk as if they were taking part in an

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<sup>168</sup> See Schechner, 1985:35-116.

actual inquiry. This is reinforced by the dialogue, with the witnesses directed how to speak into the microphone.

Another form of naturalism is that where the plays are little more than rehearsed readings, the actors seated on a row of stools or chairs, with no stage lighting or other setting. Soans believes that the “quintessence of verbatim theatre is a group of actors sitting on chairs, or cardboard boxes or a sofa, talking to the audience, simply telling stories” (Hammond & Steward, 2008:21). The row of chairs (or stools) here suggests theatre as lecture. When this is the methodology for verbatim theatre, the actors have only their voices and a few gestures to represent the events and characters.

Gestures, however, can be more powerful than full-scale realism. In *This is A True Story* there is a single gesture which lifts the production from a narration to a piece of compelling theatre. For one hour, the audience has watched the actor playing Howard tell the story of his sad and brutal life, half-naked and shuffling strangely around the stage. Then, at the very end, without a word, he puts on the familiar orange tracksuit and attaches the shackles to his feet, and there is a moment of shocked realisation. The reason he walks so strangely is from twenty-five years of being constrained. As a member of the audience, this one moment was ‘theatrical’ for me in a way in which the rest of the play was not.

This moment embodies Brecht’s theory of *gestus*, whereby the dramatic essence of the scene, the beat of the play, finds expression in a summative word, line or image which carries both meaning and emotion. Peter Brook’s definition of ‘immediate theatre’ is another rendering of such a moment: the image which scorches onto the spectator’s memory, an indelible mark left behind when everything else about a production is forgotten (1968:136). William McEvoy describes *Le Dernier*

*Caravansérail*, as being “full of such moments” and notes how H       Cixous, and its director, Ariane Mnouchkine, chose to recreate the stories of refugees without words, relying on visual images (2006:213).

The power of physical representations to leave indelible marks is related by Jeffers of her play *I’ve Got Something to Show You*:

Slowly and deliberately the actors began to pour the water over themselves creating a definite frisson in the audience as they watched the actors use the water to wash their hands and arms, pouring the water over their faces and hair in slow gestures designed to suggest a ritual act of cleansing. This simultaneously echoed Esrafil’s last gesture of pouring petrol on his body and the attempts to extinguish the flames. (2009:102)

This is theatre performing its ancient role of ritual. Another ritualistic act is created by Farber in *He Left Quietly* (2003). Throughout this play a large pile of shoes has been on stage, which the audience learns were found “in a dusty store room behind uniforms” and belonged to “the forgotten men of Death Row”. At the end of the play, the stage directions indicate that the play’s protagonist, Duma, brings the audience on to the stage so they can find matching partners for each shoe and lay the pairs out in a long line across the stage:

*DUMA holds a calabash of water and walks along the line of shoes, sprinkling water on them. He recites his praise names as an incantation. He speaks to the ancestors – asking for their presence in this ritual.* (2008:235)

It is this moment which creates a compelling work of theatre; the *gestus* that defines the play.



## 4.2 Creating an Aesthetic for Verbatim Theatre

Writing *Trash* and *Cuts*, I found myself facing the problem of, on one hand, writing two plays which each told the story of the death of a young woman, and, on the other hand, trying to find a suitable methodology for these plays. Simultaneously, I was trying to balance writing the plays with what I had learned from my study of the genre. This is not to say that I wanted to encapsulate a theory of verbatim theatre within a theatrical form, but rather that from watching and analysing a large number of verbatim plays, I made choices drawn from my personal opinion of what was dramatically interesting, and what kind of verbatim plays led to evenings that were less than stimulating.

It often appeared that the excitement engendered by the productions lay more in the communal experience of shared witness than in the drama itself. *The Guardian* critic Lyn Gardner, for example, notes that at the end of a performance of *The Exonerated*, when it was revealed that “the frail woman playing Sunny Jacobs really was Sunny Jacobs telling her tale of surviving 16 years on Death Row and the execution of her husband” (2005), she was on her feet with everyone else. The applause and the standing ovation is not for the play, but for the person, and it might be suggested that it is the act of witnessing which inspires this heightened emotion. There is a strong religious element in the way in which a play such as *The Exonerated* creates its rapport with the audience, and such a relationship is not one that requires an audience to engage intellectually with the subject matter. In writing my plays, the question I asked myself was whether it was possible to write a verbatim play that allowed a more objective view and did not try to manipulate the audience through an over-dependence on the emotional bond forged between them and those whose stories were being told.

In my journal I observe that several verbatim plays are ‘worthy’, but theatrically static; many appeared dull. I began to question the dramatic form of the genre and ask whether some of the popularity of many verbatim plays indeed derived from the fact that they were undemanding and old-fashioned. What concerned me was that the contentious, sometimes polemical, subject matter in the productions was not matched by any sense of danger within the construction of the plays. Moreover, it seemed that many verbatim plays made few demands on the audience other than to listen; they pandered to the audience in a way that many contemporary fictional plays did not. While the aim of many verbatim plays was to provide a stage for those whose voices were unheard, it seemed that this single intention had overwhelmed all other considerations:

We care because the people in these plays have actual lives somewhere else. So we engage with them empathetically. We may even decide to want to do something, even join a charitable organisation. And isn’t that what the playwrights want? They’re not going to create any sudden shifts in meaning, or any other techniques to interrupt the narrative. Yes, these plays tell stories, but just because these stories are about real people, must they be told so simply? Is this the kind of theatre I want to write?<sup>169</sup>

My irritation with verbatim plays as a member of the audience did not, at this time, feed into my critical assessment of the genre. When I began this thesis, in the autumn of 2005, I was convinced that a word-for-word adherence to original source material was an essential component of the genre, but as I began to write *Cuts*, I realised that the problem was the label attached to the genre, which set up these expectations of precise verbal reproduction. I began to question whether it was possible to write

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<sup>169</sup> Journal entry, 22 October 2005.

a play that was based on verbatim material, but which was not the kind of verbatim play that I was seeing. It appeared that the label, verbatim, had become enmeshed in a particular form of realistic theatre, and that Reinelt was correct in her assessment that the term “needlessly ups the ante on the promise of documentary” (2009:13). Stephen Bottoms reflected my dilemma in his claim that the term verbatim “tends to fetishise the notion that we are getting things ‘word for word,’ straight from the mouths of those involved” (2006:59). The questions I now asked were whether a genre that parades the authenticity of its source material had to abide by a specific set of rules, and if this were the case, what form should those rules take? Could an art form develop within such limitations?

It appeared from dialogues at conferences where the genre was debated, that many academics were asking the same questions. The dialectic became an open debate at the ICA in May, 2007<sup>170</sup>, and what emerged at this round table discussion was a clear clash of views. Some speakers, such as Jonathan Holmes, declared that the most important aspect of creating these plays was to honour those whose testimony was being exploited, while the playwright Dennis Kelly argued that theatre could not have rules. In his opinion, any methodology, any combination of fact and fiction was permissible, since the aim had to be to write a good play.<sup>171</sup> This debate, which at this point was, in my mind, theoretical, became actual over a year later, when I began to develop *Cuts*.<sup>172</sup> I discovered that I had to choose whether to adhere to a strictly factual presentation of events in the play, or endeavour to create a challenging presentation of the facts at the expense of factuality.

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<sup>170</sup> Round Table: Can Verbatim and Political Theatre Change the World? 19 May 2007.

<sup>171</sup> Kelly’s views are demonstrated in his mockumentary verbatim play *Taking Care of Baby*, London: Oberon Books, 2007.

<sup>172</sup> During the research period my concern was the function and content of the play, during the writing process this changed to one of aesthetics.

#### 4.2.1 ‘Sculpting’ the facts: The creation of *Trash* and *Cuts*

In a fully-realised production of a play, there are four distinct moments of creativity: the research and choice of the narrative, the creation of the play as a text, the creation of the play as a performance and the delivery of the play to an audience. Since neither *Trash* nor *Cuts* has yet been given a full production, I can only cover the first two areas, those of research and writing. Both of these plays began with a one-year period of research before I began writing either play, but even as I began to draft the plays, I continued the research for another two years.

I first learned about the issues which led to the creation of both plays from an article by Ian Herbert (2005). The piece caught my attention because the events it described took place in Norwich, the city where I live and work. In his article, Herbert presents many of the key points which were to become the subject of *Cuts*. These are: that people with personality disorders “cannot be detained for treatment unless it is likely to alleviate or prevent the deterioration of the disorder” and that as a result, many women who self-harm are being sentenced to prison and that some of these women die there. The heart of Herbert’s article is the case of Rebecca Gidney and Judge Jacobs’s pronouncement that he had to send a woman with mental health problems to prison although he believed that prison was not an appropriate place for her. This article provided me with the issues which I was to explore in my plays, and it also provided me with leads for my research, including a reference to the campaigning organisation, Inquest.

As I began work on the plays, the authorial control was, to a large extent, mine. I chose the issues and actively researched for stories that illustrated the issues, acting much as an investigative journalist would. I contacted organisations that worked in this area, followed up contacts suggested by them and read articles and Parliamentary and Government-commissioned

reports on the issues. Indeed, autonomy of authorship continued until I chose the individuals whose stories I wished to use to illustrate the issues. At this point, their real lives created a parallel authorship and intent which had to be taken into account. Unlike plays which are commissioned by a third party to investigate a specific event or the life of a person, I began with a diffuse topic area: women in prison, women who self-harmed, women who suffered from personality disorders and problems within the judiciary and medical establishment. There was clearly a risk that any play attempting to cover all these issues would be both rambling and didactic. I was wary of constructing a play that was little more than a number of 'talking heads' who made short speeches to the audience. I needed stories and I needed 'characters'. Since I was aiming to write a verbatim play, it was not possible to invent either. I had to find people whose stories embodied the issues, and who were willing for their lives to be used in a play.

The control of the content, therefore, could not be said to be purely mine, since my work could not exist without the intervention of those who had lived the experiences I wished to write about. Even before I had identified them, they influenced the play through my need to find them. Without the presence of these people who I could carve into characters, I did not have a play. Indeed, for the first year of my research into *Cuts*, I was frustrated by the sense that the play remained at the level of reportage. My theatrical model for the work at that time was based on Soans's plays with their interweaving multiple narratives, but I also wanted to include a variety of textual types, including speeches from the House of Lords and other documents. In a previous play, *Red*,<sup>173</sup> I had created a collage from abstract information, speeches and invented scenes. I hoped to employ a similar methodology for *Cuts*, although in this case I would use verbatim text in the place of imagined dialogue.

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<sup>173</sup> Unpublished play, 2005, based on the life of Chaim Soutine, now titled *Soutine, For Example*.

However, for many months, the lack of characters remained a serious problem. When the first scene of *Cuts* was performed at the Symposium on Theatrical Verbatim Practices,<sup>174</sup> it was a disparate collage of background material; I did not have any one story on which to base the play. Nor could I decide how to create the narrative drive to help the audience through what often felt like undigested research material.

A major obstacle in finding characters was that the women whose stories were central to the issue I wished to explore were, for the most part, dead. They could only speak if I was to eschew the verbatim form and imagine their dialogue. I rejected this route because I was convinced that there was a more powerful way to tell the story of these women than that of docudrama. I was also, at this time, critical of hybridisation; I did not want the play to mix fact and fiction.

The turning point in terms of development of *Cuts* and *Trash* was a rally for the “United Friends and Families Campaign” at Trafalgar Square on Saturday 28 October, 2006. Here, I met a number of parents and siblings of women who had died in prison or in the care of the State. These included Jean Pearson, the protagonist of *Trash*, Kirsty Blanksby, the sister of Petra Blanksby and the family of Anne-Marie Bates.<sup>175</sup> I also talked to Pauline Campbell, whose daughter, Sarah Campbell, had died in Styal and who I had previously met when I attended one of her prison demonstrations at Eastwood Park. It was evident that there were extremely sad personal stories behind each of the deaths. My decision of whose story would be told, however, would depend not only on the character of the deceased and on their family’s willingness to allow their

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<sup>174</sup> Performed by students of the Central School of Speech and Drama, directed by Geoff Colman, 13 July 2006.

<sup>175</sup> Anne Marie Bates died at HMP Brockhill on 31 August 2001. The nineteen-year-old mother of three children, the youngest born prematurely two weeks before she was remanded into custody, she was suffering from the suicide of one brother and attempted suicide of another brother.

story to become a play, but on the inherent value of the individual narrative as part of the overall story I wished to tell.

The rally, while it provided me with the necessary contacts, also highlighted the aleatory nature of writing a verbatim play that is not based on a specific event or person. The choice of story and characters was very much a matter of chance. Furthermore, my first contact with the families left me with a sense of ambivalence and serious doubts as to whether I could write these plays. One concern was that the reasons for the families to tell their stories were not the same as the reason I wanted to write the plays, although there were areas of consensus. As noted earlier, the families wanted to apportion blame, while I wanted to widen the story. Moreover, those who attended the rally were self-selecting in that these were the families who were campaigning for justice. There were many other stories of women who had also died in prison, which would not be told because their families preferred to grieve in private.

Nevertheless, I followed up the contacts made at the rally. Interviewing Jean, I found the story that would become *Trash*, and Pauline Campbell put me in touch with Pete Blanksby. From this moment, the authorship of both *Trash* and *Cuts* would move from my control over the text to a negotiated control between myself and the families of the young women who died. This is not to say that they have asked me to make any major changes (Jean asked me to cut one line about Kelly that she felt was too personal), but that the texts of the stories that became *Trash* and *Cuts* were now also controlled by those who had lived them.

*Trash* and *Cuts*, however, do represent my point of view. I exercised control over these stories though the way the texts were edited, and in the structure of the plays. In *Trash*, I decided to change the emphasis of the play from being a narrative of the circumstances behind the death of

Kelly Pearson, to being about her mother, Jean Pearson, and how she was changed by having to deal with her daughter's death. The change also allowed the audience to observe Jean in a more critical fashion and become aware that she might not be the most reliable witness. I chose not to add any testimony that contradicted Jean's version of events (with the exception of the doctor who argues with her), nor did I follow up other sources for their version of the story. I knew from what Jean herself said that her version would be contradicted by others, and that how she saw herself was not the same as how she was seen by those with whom she came into conflict. My aim was not to create a naturalistic drama of oppositions, but to allow the audience freedom to observe and evaluate Jean from their own interpretation of her words.

In 2008, in a discussion with creative writing postgraduates, Hare observed that in his verbatim plays he did not transcribe speech, but made the people "more deeply themselves", a phrase that perhaps requires analysis.<sup>176</sup> Ostensibly, it appears to be a statement of the impossible, a character on stage is inevitably a simulacrum of the original, but the phrase does convey the form of distillation of discourse that the playwright hopes to achieve. Through careful listening to Jean, talking about herself and her daughter, and by using her own speech with all its hesitations and repetitions, I endeavoured to capture the essence of her personality.

The absorption of the discourse of the person whose voice is being used in the play is part of the work of the verbatim playwright. "Their rhythms became mine", notes Hare (2005:79); Jean commented that I was "channelling" her as I restructured her dialogue.<sup>177</sup> Retention of vernacular speech is an inherent and important element of verbatim theatre. Brown notes with regard to *Aftershocks* that it is "the repetitions,

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<sup>176</sup> University of East Anglia, 22 October 2008.

<sup>177</sup> Personal conversation, September 2008.



convolutions, pauses, malapropisms, idiom, vocabulary and non-word sounds that make each character's voice as distinctive as a fingerprint" (2001:xiv). Simon Armitage, when working on his documentary musical, *Feltham Sings* (2002), preferred to work from tapes and not from transcripts because: "If someone had 'tidied' the language, or edited to reflect their own view of what was important, the voice tended to be lost" (Paget and Roscoe, 2006:1).

Jeffers employs a similar fidelity to the speech of those whose words make up *I've Got Something to Show You*. She observes that the interviewees "wanted to tidy up their speeches and to put them into what they saw as proper English" which led to a dilemma, since Jeffers felt that their actual speech was more interesting to listen to. She notes: "Eventually we came to a compromise whereby some of the language was corrected and some left as it was. I think everyone was happy with this".<sup>178</sup>

In writing the two plays, I was always aware of the need to craft the transcripts. In *Trash*, for example, I structured Jean's narrative so that her own action in calling the police comes as the climax of the story. Although I never felt that my relationship with my source material was that of 'driftwood', the term employed by Hare to describe how he creates art from the voices of his interviewees (2005:29), I did feel that I was 'sculpting' them, to use the term favoured by Emily Mann (cited by Attilio Favorini, 2009:152). In writing *Trash*, this was a long, but not problematic, process. However, in writing *Cuts* I encountered a number of obstacles.

Following the rally in Trafalgar Square, I decided that in *Cuts* I would concentrate on the story of Petra Blanksby. I interviewed her father and

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<sup>178</sup> Personal email 21 February 2006.

sister and, over three weeks in 2008, I attended and transcribed her inquest. As a result, I had hundreds of pages of text. I could have written a play based entirely on the inquest, but I wanted to find a dramatic form that mirrored the journey of the women through the contradictory world of the mental health and judicial systems. The material was dramatic and compelling and I wanted to find a dramaturgy that matched this.

“I don’t want the play to be a recital of case studies, even if I had them. Although, of course, I don’t.” I wrote in my journal.<sup>179</sup> Nor did I want to present the story solely through direct address. The lack of ambiguity in many verbatim plays strengthened this judgement. What seemed crucial to me in seeking a structural form for *Cuts* was to employ an aesthetic that removed the playwright from the play, but allowed the audience room to discover the story.

My journal records that, even in productions that seemed otherwise static, it was the memory of key moments, the *gestus* of certain plays, as described earlier in this chapter, which remained with me. I wanted to find a way to create such moments in *Cuts*. The two powerful acts of ritual in *He Left Quietly* and *I’ve Got Something to Show You* convinced me that the ritual that I had written for the end of *Cuts* was how I should end the play, but I needed to find other ways of telling the story that would be equally compelling. I decided that, if I concentrated on creating powerful visual and oral moments, I might find a suitable aesthetic for the whole play. Entries in my writing journal reflect the problems of trying to accommodate an imagistic approach that also allowed the testimony to be heard: “Can one write a play which will make people angry and still be aesthetically satisfying?”<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> 11 February 2009

<sup>180</sup> 11 February 2009

The use of installations seemed an ideal form to create space where the audience could find many of the facts that were central to the story I wished to tell, but I did not want them to be purely a visual artefact. I wanted the installations to be a fluid part of a theatrical performance and sound would be a crucial element in creating this. A combination of soundscapes, filmed scenes and live action seemed to offer the most useful form. Installations would also allow a change in the pace of the play,<sup>181</sup> and, in the mental health installations, I could find an absurdist form which mirrored the reality for the women as they sought treatment for their disorders.

In choosing soundscapes, I was strongly influenced by *[re]locate* (2008), a sound installation by Tahera Aziz, an extract of which I saw at the “Between Fact and Fiction” conference at the University of Birmingham.<sup>182</sup> The work is a filmed image of the bus stop where Stephen Lawrence was murdered, which is accompanied by the sounds of traffic and the static of a police radio frequency. Its power lies in the manner in which it allows the audience to write its own narrative.

Finding a form that allowed me to balance the verbatim texts with the images I wanted to create, gave me the freedom to create. In my use of the text, I was reliant on the permission of those whose words I used, but authorship of the play was shared. It belonged to me in terms of creating the structure of the work, and would belong to the audience in terms of their reading of the performance work. There will, of course, be further changes when the plays are produced; there will be additional layers of authorship through the involvement of a director, a designer, and actors and technicians. More negotiations will ensue to create a work that may,

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<sup>181</sup> I continued to think of *Cuts* as a play until I had finished writing it, after which I began to realise that it had evolved into a theatrical installation.

<sup>182</sup> 5 September 2007.

one hopes, fulfil the requirements of all those who author it, and a successful fusion of creativity and narrative.

My choice of a theatrical installation is, I believe, a step towards an effective aesthetic for verbatim theatre. Billington in his review of *Talking to Terrorists* writes that “Verbatim theatre is not just living journalism. If it is to succeed, it has to have the shape and rhythm of art” (2005b). *Cuts* is by no means the only attempt to find an aesthetic for the genre. Holmes has also essayed a combination of art and music in *Fallujah*, although the art works were not fully integrated into the theatrical performance, and again in *Katrina*.<sup>183</sup> Cixous and Mnouchkine chose silence and movement for *Le Dernier Caravansérail*. It is, perhaps, between these productions, that an aesthetic may be found, where there is room for both verbatim speech and ambiguity, testimony and silence.

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<sup>183</sup> September 2009.

## Conclusion

The title of this thesis implies that there is an element of fabrication in the creation of verbatim theatre, yet it appears that for many practitioners of the genre, what is required is not invention, but the reproduction on stage of original testimony or inquiry, unadorned by any form of theatricality. The verbatim play, as Stafford-Clark claims, presents the research “nakedly”,<sup>184</sup> and the adverb is useful in understanding why the genre appears in many cases to be anti-theatrical, or even, I would suggest, anti-aesthetic. The naked presentation of fact is not merely found in the hyper-naturalism of the production of many verbatim plays, but is central to the way they are written. The reason for this stripping down of artistry is that verbatim plays are created to be functional.

That the functions of the genre can be listed, reveals the extent to which the plays are viewed as practical tools. Their aim, in many cases, is to replace other forms of information, as an accurate record of political events and social injustice. The intentionality of those creating verbatim plays, indeed, provides the key towards an understanding of the genre. The aim of the plays created by iceandfire, for example, is summarised by Masters, when she asks whether the creative contextualisation of human rights abuses can change perceptions and create action (2007). The political, and often polemical, function of the plays is seen to be more important than their realisation as works of theatre.

The political or social aims of the plays goes hand in hand, moreover, with a perception on the part of those who create them, that it is their authenticity which must be emphasised over all other aspects of the text. Verbatim theatre frequently promotes its texts not as alternative readings

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<sup>184</sup> See page 262.

of official versions of events, but as the one correct version; representations of events tend to be shown as the definitive versions of those events.

It is thus clear that the choice of the label of the genre is significant; the word ‘verbatim’ invests the genre with a cloak of authenticity. Indeed, playwrights may choose to use verbatim, rather than create a fictional rendering of the issues, for precisely that reason, because the genre allows them to demonstrate what they believe is the ‘true story’. Ralph, for example, records how he felt that the story of *Deepcut* required a documentary form, and that since “story dictates form, he had no choice, following a long and intensive research process, other than to make *Deep Cut* a verbatim drama”<sup>185</sup>:

I was certain at the beginning of this process (and I am even more so now) that in order to tell a story so full of confusion, misdirection and unknowns, the only way to do so would be via verbatim (2008:23)

*Deep Cut* (like *Gladiator Games*), as previously noted, in its published version lists the sources for each speech in the plays. This, again, underlines the importance for the playwright of demonstrating that the sources are genuine, the words those originally spoken or written and the play the authentic version of the event. Verbatim plays aim, as Kent notes, to “get as near to the truth as you can” (Hammond and Stewart, 2008:153). Yet, as has been noted, what is problematic within the genre is its reliance on a notion of a single truth, as well as a certain naivety in relation to the testimony on which it seeks to base its authority.

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<sup>185</sup> Noted by Othniel Smith (2008) Writers’ Guild blog from debate at the Welsh Branch of the Writers’ Guild, 20 September, 2008.  
[http://www.writersguild.org.uk/public/003\\_WritersGuil/264\\_WGGBNewsThe.html](http://www.writersguild.org.uk/public/003_WritersGuil/264_WGGBNewsThe.html).  
 Accessed 10 February 2010.

It is only in those verbatim plays where the reality of the document itself is open to question that playwrights feel free to allow some deviation from the original source material. In such cases, the emphasis is less on an authentic presentation and more on how an imaginative theatrical presentation of the material can illuminate the texts. Kent claims that verbatim theatre has to choose between journalism and “make-believe” and that any combination of verbatim and imaginative writing is “a rather uncomfortable straddling of the two” (Stoller, 2005). But it has been seen that plays can employ both a variety of practices, which may include elements of fiction or an inclusion of other art forms.

Writing a verbatim play presents the playwright with a dilemma: should the play exist merely as curated journalism which delivers a powerful message, or should it aim to be a compelling work of theatre, a work of art? The examination of the choices made in writing *Cuts*, shows how I faced a choice between foregrounding the function of the play to deliver information, and my own creative impulse, which wanted a more imaginative realisation of factual material. The argument, it appeared, could be summarised as, on one side, John Berger’s dictum, that you only have to ask a single simple question of any piece of art, which is “Does this work help or encourage men to know and claim their social rights?” (1979:15) and, on the other side, a wish to create a work of ambiguity which would allow the audience to make their own journey within my play. My decision to create a theatrical installation shows how I attempted to fuse both sides of this argument.

My choices in writing the plays were influenced by consideration of the people whose lives I was exploiting. Verbatim plays are created from the juxtaposition of a mosaic<sup>186</sup> of texts and voices; the authorship of the play may be said to be that of those whose testimony is used, as well as that of

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<sup>186</sup> The image recalls Julia Kristeva’s definition of a text, as “a mosaic of quotations” (1980:66), which itself could be a definition of the genre.

the playwright. It is traditionally said that the story belongs to the storyteller, but in verbatim theatre it is not always possible for an audience to identify who is telling the story. The multi-vocal quality of verbatim plays can produce uncertainty about authorship.

The people on whose lives the plays are based might well feel that these are their stories, yet in the construction of the narrative of the plays, the plays belong to the playwright. Those whose testimony forms the text of a verbatim play might assert their authorship of the text, but the very nature of a theatrical creation and performance creates a number of fictive interventions. The dramaturg Suzanne Bells notes the multiple authorship of a verbatim play when she asks (of *Unprotected*) whether the authorship belongs to the writers “who carried out the research, asking leading questions to get specific answers?” Or with the director and dramaturg, who endeavoured “to bring out the themes, threads of narrative, arguments, questions and focus?” Or did it belong to the interviewees?<sup>187</sup>

It is clear that the processes of interview, selection of texts and editing does allow the creation of a fictional construct; the story is the one which the playwright (or group carrying out the function of the playwright) wishes to tell. Edgar notes how his script based on Nixon’s White House tapes consisted of a number of value judgements (1988:62).<sup>188</sup> Similarly, the witness testimony at Petra’s inquest could have been written in a number of different ways. I could have emphasised the unreliability of the prison officers, whose evidence was contradictory, or how different individuals were accused by counsel of failing Petra. The point of view of the play was my decision.

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<sup>187</sup> From paper given at Birmingham Conference, “Between Fact and Fiction”, 5 September 2007.

<sup>188</sup> See pages 267-268.



In verbatim theatre the simulacrum of verisimilitude is employed not solely as evidence of factuality, but because of the empathetic bond it creates between the giver of testimony and the audience. Many verbatim plays rely on the audience taking on the role of witness, and on the creation of this bond for their emotional force. The encounter between speaker and audience is forged through a number of rhetorical devices, but at the same time, the encounter is one that does not allow for layers of interpretation between testimony and audience. It is because of the emphasis placed on maintaining a sense of immediacy in the encounter that the genre has developed the performative style of the play reading or the lecture hall.

It has been seen how several playwrights have already attempted to extend the boundaries of the genre through the use of metatheatricity, and an imaginative performative form. What is clear, too, is the importance of *gestus*, even in performances otherwise lacking in visual imagination, as in the image of Neal putting on his shackles in *This is a True Story*. The power of the performative moment, I would suggest, offers a suggestion of how verbatim theatre can evolve. There are moments from recent productions of verbatim plays which will remain when other aspects of the production fade from the memory.

One such moment is the end of *Guantanamo*, when the audience realises that there will be no curtain call; it will leave, but the actors will remain in their roles in their cages. Another took place before the performance of *Suitcase* (Ros Merkin, 2008).<sup>189</sup> This was not scripted, but occurred when a small group of children entered the concourse of London's Liverpool Street Station. They looked around, confused, lugging suitcases behind them, while a Salvation Army Band, (which was not a part of the production) played "Good King Wenceslas". *Suitcase* uses original

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<sup>189</sup> 2 December 2008

testimony to recreate the arrival of the *Kindertransport*, but, for me, it was only this chance juxtaposition of sound and characters that created a moment of real theatre.

Examination of verbatim plays reveals that what has become accepted as the norm in terms of presentation can be challenged or subverted. There is clearly room for imaginative expression in verbatim theatre, yet it is also evident that fidelity to the document and testimony, and an over-reliance on authenticity leads to a sterile style of performance. Too often, the polemical content of the plays is matched by a leaden theatrical recreation; yet playwrights such as Kaufman, Holmes and Cixous demonstrate that this does not have to be the only way that verbatim plays are fashioned. The potential of theatre to evolve may, one hopes, lead to more imaginative constructs of reality in verbatim theatre, even at the risk of moving away from literalist interpretations.

Given that the nature of verbatim theatre is itself challenging in its revelation of societal problems and examples of injustice, it may be that its theatrical realisation should be equally challenging and, perhaps, lead to some form of radical experimentation. Dance and the visual arts already experiment with extracts from verbatim texts, and it may be that verbatim theatre could follow in their example. Indeed, one development for the genre could well be in more collaborative works with performance and visual artists, dancers and musicians. *Cuts* is a very small step in that direction; the potential for the genre is vast.

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